Like a Lightning Strike

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Like a Lightning Strike

by miss_aphelion

Summary

In a world where omegas are instant celebrities and treated like royalty, Will just wants to be left alone. So he keeps what he is a secret, managing to avoid the spotlight and the restrictions that come with it for nearly twenty years.

Then a case goes wrong, and his secrets start to unravel before the entire world—and even more worrying, it happens in front of Hannibal, the alpha that was already fascinated with him before he knew what he was.

Notes

Author's note: I originally had this idea for a Teen Wolf fic, but couldn't get it to work. Add in cannibals and serial killers, and suddenly it fits. I swear, my mind. Anyway: Omegas tend to get the short end of the stick in fic, but I thought what if they were really rare, and you know, scarcity increases value, so what if it was like winning the lottery. You end up an omega, and you're set for life. You get beautiful homes and your own private security and your choice of alpha suitors. Except of course it doesn't matter how wonderful something sounds if it's not actually something you want, which is where Will comes in.

Extra note: I'm writing this mostly as stress relief because I'm supposed to be working on an original novel but it stopped being fun, and I had to take a step back. I cannot promise quick updates but I already wrote chapter three and chapter two is partway done (one of these days I might even write something in linear order).

See the end of the work for more notes

where the soul shines

The blood pool was spread out behind the victim in the shape of wings. Will could see them hovering there. This is not unintentional. The brush strokes were easy enough to see if he leaned close enough, painted with the blood before it had dried, but the attention to detail was so intricate that he could also see the individual, bloody feathers, drawn like they were really there laid across the floor.

The victim was a young man named Michael Keane. He was pale from loss of blood but otherwise almost pristine. The murderer had left him here like a piece of art, not so much an apology as a concession. He could never have been what was wanted, but he could be this.

It was gruesome and beautiful all at the same time, and it twisted something in Will, making him want to run or throw up or just disappear. Jack was watching though, like always. Jack wouldn't let him get away with not *looking*, so he took a step back from the scene, and another.

And another.

Like winding back an old VHS tape, the picture before him unwound, then snapped back into place with perfect, crystal clarity.

The house was on the higher end but not unreasonably so. The clutter on the shelves had an air of being staged, strategically placed to create the intended atmosphere. Michael was standing in his kitchen, listening to music on his headphones, when Will appeared behind him and slit him open at both sides.

Will gently lowered him down, watching his desperate, gasping breaths, before soundly snapping his neck. There was no reason to punish him further than he already had to, it wasn't really his fault that he wasn't quite right. He was still beautiful and sweet and charming, but he was a beta. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't form the bond with him that he craved.

But he would not let such beauty go to waste, and he would not let it be squandered by someone else.

He took a small paintbrush from the pocket of his coat, and spread the blood out into the shape of glittering, gossamer wings, while Michael desperately tried to move before it was too late.

It was already too late, of course. This was my design.

"Will!" Jack was already to the point of shouting when Will was pulled back.

Will blinked and suddenly his hands were clean, and he was three feet away from the body, not hovering over the victim's side. He glanced over at Jack. "Jack?" he asked.

Jack frowned at him, his eyes going narrow. Jack always had the disturbing habit of treating Will like some malfunctioning piece of equipment that he could not find the parts to fix or replace, but was too indispensable to throw out.

In some ways, Jack's carelessness with him was almost refreshing. Mostly it was annoying.

"It's an alpha," Will told him after a moment, before glancing back at the body. "He's looking for a mate. He wants to start a family."

Jack's frown only deepened, and he crossed his arms. "The victim is a male beta," he said. "Not exactly built for giving birth."

"Yes," Will agreed. "And that's why he's dead." He paused, stepping back towards the victim, watching as the wings seemed to spread like the body was planning to take off from this world to the next. "He's looking for an omega. And constantly being disappointed."

"Omegas don't just turn up," Jack pointed out. "It's not like finding the prize at the bottom of the cereal box. It's more like winning the lottery."

Will glanced away. Omegas had dwindled over the years to a scant one percent of the population. As such, they were rounded up, numbered, and tagged, like an endangered species by a wildlife society, and then given around the clock protection. They were also spoiled society darlings and the world's most loved social media celebrities, so they had a touch of fantasy to them. They didn't seem like real people, not even to Will, especially not to him. Will didn't like to think about them too much; rather apart from the envy experienced by a large portion of the population, he mostly looked at their lives with fear and a deeply buried dread.

"Christ. Fine. So he's looking for his other half. This is the eighth body in four months," Jack said. "How much worse is this going to get?"

"He's not going to stop until he finds what he's looking for or he's caught," Will told him. "He has some of the traits of a serial killer, the way he leaves the bodies, the wings, but at the same time—there's a practicality here."

"How so?" Jack demanded.

"He plays at finding an omega, but it's mostly rehearsal. He's not deluded. He doesn't think they're what he needs. They're just passing the time," Will explained. "Usually a serial killer doesn't have an end goal. They kill because they're killers, because they have to, and they enjoy it." He paused, then looked up. "Our alpha is doing this out of some convoluted sense of duty. He watches them, and then wants them to behave towards him in a certain way. When they don't, they end up like this."

"But it always ends like this," Bev said, as she stepped up beside him, grimacing down at the body.

"Yes," Will said. "He's not very good at interacting with people. There's something off about him."

"Well, yeah," Bev snorted.

"No, I mean, his appearance. His mannerisms. He's off-putting. He's probably never had a real date," Will explained. "People ignore him and stay away from him, without really realizing why."

"I thought serial killers were supposed to be charming?" she asked.

"Serial killers can be charming," Will countered. "And they can also be something else."

"Is he an artist?" Bev asked, her eyes skimming over the blood-drawn feathers to catalogue the detail. "Because I feel kind of skeevy saying this, but it's sort of pretty, isn't it?"

"No, this is private, it's not something he shares," Will said. "He does something menial. Something he feels is beneath him. He does this painting to elevate his victims, and by association himself." He bit his lip for a moment, then glanced back at Jack. "How far apart do the victims live?"

"All within 200 miles," Jack said.

"He's somewhere within it," Will said, with a certainty he couldn't fully explain. "Somewhere they'd all have reason to stop. Gas station, convenience store, maybe even a Starbucks. Unsuccessful alphas are few and far between, so he shouldn't be that hard to find."

"You really think he's doing all this just to get a date with an omega?" Bev asked, her wry smile twisting with something like concern. "Because this seems counter-productive. Pretty sure a serial killer won't make it past the screening process."

"Which is why he knows he can't get access to an omega. Not yet," Will shrugged. "He's building up to that."

"Do I need to contact the OPA?" Jack asked urgently. In matters of omega safety, the Omega Protection Agency was pretty much all-powerful. Jack didn't like losing the upper hand, but leaving them out of it would only make things worse. Will just raised an eyebrow and Jack snarled. "Fuck. They're gonna try to take over the investigation."

Will shook his head. "No, they're not equipped for it. They'll focus on securing everyone on the registry, but they'll leave you to find the killer."

"How sure about this theory of yours are you?" Jack asked, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose.

"There's an alpha working a dead end job somewhere in your 200 mile radius," Will said. "Let's go talk to him, then you can ask me that again. Wait until we do to contact the OPA, if you want. No omegas are in any immediate danger, none of them live in Virginia."

Will had been lying to everyone about what he was for so long that he didn't even stutter over the words. It didn't even really occur to him that he was proof to the contrary until he was already halfway home.

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Next Up: Will finds the alpha killer, and then meets Hannibal Lector, who is also an alpha (and also a killer): Hard to say which encounter will affect him more.

also gazes into you

Chapter Notes

> Note: I probably will not be able to keep updating this fast, but for the moment at least, this story isn't letting me think of *anything* else.
>
> Also, there are some lines that are either paraphrased or directly quoted from the pilot as some of the situations mirror the show set up, but pretty much the only similarities going forward are going to be their first meeting and Hannibal's extracurricular activities.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There were actually three alphas that fit Will's profile. He knew which one it would be as soon as he ran his eyes over the short list, but unlike most of his deductions, which in whatever small way, he could trace back to the evidence of his surroundings—the placement of the bodies, the motivations of people in general—this had no basis in fact and could not be properly explained.

All three were alphas that did not fit the stereotype of their gender. This in itself was no problem at all, but it had bothered one of the three enough that he had started taking out his inadequacies on young, attractive betas that refused to give him what he saw as his due.

They were also all rather uncommonly unattractive for alphas. Alphas tended to have clear skin, strong muscles, and symmetrical features—born counterparts to the typically more delicate omegas. Will didn't like to generalize, but it was unavoidable in his line work, and all three men had obviously never found the outward confidence needed to be a powerful, successful alpha male. Will often thought fate was cruel, trying to catalog people so neatly. Not everyone was bound to fit where they were placed.

The truth was, it could be any of the three. The victims had all been near each of their places of work. They all fit the profile almost exactly.

But Will knew it was Trevor Morton.

Jack sent him with two uniforms as an escort as he and Bev split off to check out the other two suspects. Will wanted to protest that they needed to go in with more force, but couldn't really justify it. They were only supposed to meet and greet, question the suspects lightly just to test the waters.

In which case Will knew sending him as the emissary was probably a mistake.

He had never been very social, as much an opposite of his own gender as the three suspects were of theirs. He had certainly never quite learned the fine art of subtlety. He was able to

relate to anyone emotionally, to mirror their mindset and their motivations—but ask him to small talk and he'll choke.

"You sure about this place?" Martin, one of the uniforms, asked. He was looking at the small gas station with distaste. There was a neon sign that looked to be only about half-lit hanging above the door: QuickMart Express.

It seemed fairly redundant, like the sort of fictional place one might find in a cartoon. He could understand Martin's skepticism, but the mundane feel of the place was exactly the point. Trevor was punishing himself for his failures at the exact same time he was punishing everyone else for not seeing his worth. Hiding in plain sight.

"But I see you," Will whispered.

"What?" Martin asked snappishly, glancing back at his partner with a roll of his eyes. Will could not remember the partner's name, but it was something like Luke or Larry or Leonard. Neither were too impressed with having been assigned to babysit him.

Will often thought he could write a paper about the interactions of alphas and betas with a disguised omega on suppressants, if it wouldn't sort of give away the game. Some, predominately alphas, though Jack was an outlier, seemed to know what he was on an almost instinctual level, and were overprotective and over-accommodating without realizing why. Some, betas, more often than not, seemed only to sense that something was off, that he did not belong, and had very little patience for him at all.

These two fell into the latter category. He sighed and started towards the store, leaving them to trail reluctantly behind him.

A small bell announced his entrance when he stepped inside, but there was no one behind the shabby, peeling linoleum counter. He glanced towards the back, running his eyes over the haphazardly stocked shelves, but there was no one. With a frown, he took a step towards the restroom, but the small paneled text above the doorknob stated 'unoccupied.'

He was so caught up in taking in his surroundings that it took him longer than it should have to realize no one had followed him inside. The officers may have rolled their eyes and gotten annoyed with him, but Jack had been pretty clear in his instructions that they were not to leave him alone, and Martin had always followed Jack's word to the letter when he'd worked with him the past.

He turned slowly back towards the door, and Trevor Morton stood there framed in the doorway. His formerly white shirt was saturated with red, so much blood contained in its cotton fibers that it was leaking out to trail down his arms and drip to the floor from his fingertips, from the tip of the knife curled in the palm of one hand.

Will swallowed hard, stumbling back as he fumbled for the gun Jack insisted that he carry. He shakily unsnapped the holster, though he didn't yet pull it free.

Martin and his partner were already dead, Will knew that much. Trevor would have slit their throats: quick, if not clean. The implacable response of an alpha whose territory had been

invaded without invitation. These days such a thing was merely considered rude, but historically it was an offense one would die for.

And Trevor believed he was born in the wrong time. He was not successful in this world because this world was no longer what it should be. It was wrong. He wasn't.

"You don't belong here," Will whispered, some remnant of a half formed vision. He could see Martin laid out on the pavement outside in his mind's eye. There would be no care to paint a masterpiece of his spilled blood. He was not an object to be admired, he was an enemy soldier, and one an alpha like Trevor would consider to be a poor example of one.

"What?" Morton asked him, his rage momentarily held back by his confusion as he looked over at Will. Will watched his growing curiosity with dread. Dying would be bad. Trevor knowing what he was would be *worse*. "Who are you? You're not like the others." Trevor snorted from his nose like a bull about to charge. He was half feral, running on instinct, and not at all weak like Will had been expecting.

No matter how thorough he made his profiles, there was always one thing he could not account for—one small detail that would never quite fit right, even after the fact.

In this case, it was that Morton was so much stronger than he'd assumed and so in touch with his alpha senses that he would figure out what Will was when no one else ever had.

Will started taking suppressants the day he crawled his way out of his first heat, and hadn't stopped since. He used a heavy, slightly unpleasant cologne, that alphas despised and did their best to avoid, though it was almost unnecessary considering the care Will already took to avoid *them*. No one had ever guessed he might be an omega. No one had ever even been *suspicious*. It was too unlikely to be considered.

But all it took was one deep breath, and Trevor knew.

His aggression seemed to bleed out of him, replaced by a steely resolve that was far more terrifying. "Omega," he said reverently, and the knife dropped from his hand.

In hindsight it was, of course, incredibly stupid for an *omega* to have tracked down an alpha obsessed with finding one, but Will had gotten complacent. He'd gotten so good at hiding he'd forgotten there was *always* the chance he'd be found out.

He pulled the gun out swiftly, his heart stammering nearly out of his chest as he aimed it across at Trevor. "Trevor Morton, you are under arrest. Get on your knees. Hands behind your head."

"You're not going to shoot me," Trevor told him, his voice shifting to something almost fond. Juxtaposed against his bloody visage, his half-mad red eyes, it sent chills down Will's spine.

"I can promise that I will," he responded. His own voice sounded calm, but his hands were trembling and they gave him away.

Even prepared for it, Will didn't have time to react to Trevor's attack. The alpha dodged to one side and then came straight at him with all the speed gifted to alphas. He spun them into the wall, with Will pressed up against it, his gun wedged between it and his chest.

"I've been waiting for you," Trevor said, his breath tickling the back of his neck. "You don't know this yet, but you were always going to be mine."

Trevor was forcing the hand holding the gun pinned to the wall, but Will managed to slide his other hand over enough to grip it and start pulling it to his other side. Trevor was too distracted to notice, and honestly probably couldn't bring himself to consider Will a threat. Omegas were widely considered to be passive creatures: they liked puppies and small children and abhorred violence.

Will may have misjudged Trevor, but nowhere near as badly as Trevor had misjudged him.

As Trevor pressed his teeth to the back of his neck, preparing to bite down, Will managed to lift the gun out from where it had been pressed against the wall. He tilted it back towards the alpha holding him down, until it rested it upside down across his own left shoulder, and then he pulled the trigger.

There was an incoherent roar of pain and surprise, and Will managed to twist away, pushing off a few feet before landing with his back against the register counter. The bullet had gone through Trevor's face, but he was still alive, stepping towards Will like he didn't quite realize what had happened to him yet. Alphas were hard to kill, but this time Will didn't hesitate.

He lifted his gun and emptied the rest of the clip.

* * * * * *

Will sat huddled in the backseat of Jack's car, his feet resting on the pavement, wrapped in a blanket with a Starbuck's coffee held between his hands, and tried not to look at the two tarp covered bodies spread out along the parking lot.

He couldn't quite seem to get his hands to stop trembling. He didn't know if it was Trevor's discovery of what he was, or the fact that he'd just killed someone, or the fact that Martin was dead just like he had known he was, and so was Luke-Larry-Leonard and Will hadn't even ever bothered to learn his name.

He could still hear Trevor's surprised voice: *Omega*.

But dead men tell no tales.

Will bit his lip, setting the coffee aside so he could scrub a hand roughly through his hair. That wasn't why, he decided. He didn't kill him to protect his secret, he didn't have a choice. Regardless of whether his secret came out, or didn't come out, Trevor would have bound them together. Or he might have been driven mad with enough rage that he just killed Will instead.

Trevor Morton was a killer with no regard for any life but his own, and Will had done the only thing that he could.

He glanced back over towards the police line and frowned when he saw Jack lifting up the tape so Dr. Alana Bloom could slip beneath it. He repressed the urge to groan. Jack calling Alana was uncomfortably similar to a school official calling a parent to come deal with an unruly child.

Will had been refusing to be treated by the EMTs since back up had arrived, and everyone was getting increasingly twitchy about it. But Will had already had one near miss today, he was not prepared to risk another one. Fortunately, there wasn't any law that could force a beta male to get treatment if he didn't want it.

Unfortunately, Alana Bloom was a whole different sort of force to be reckoned with.

"Will," she called, almost before she reached him, looking flawlessly put together even as she sounded a bit a breathless. She watched him with obvious worry, one of the few people in his life who always seemed a bit more concerned about him than about what he could do. "Are you alright? Jack says you're refusing to get checked out."

She kneeled in front of him, hesitantly reaching out to brush back a lock of his hair. He'd cleaned the blood off his skin, but there was still some splatter along the neckline of his shirt. His back was covered it in. He could feel the dried blood crusting on the other side of his thin material, like an itch that couldn't be scratched.

"I think you're in shock," she said with a frown. She moved her hand back as though she was going to place it against his forehead, and Will shifted away, glaring at her reproachfully. She pulled her hand back with a sigh. "You need to see a doctor."

"I'm not going to the hospital," Will told her. "That's not negotiable. I'm fine. He didn't hurt me."

"That's debatable," Alana snapped, her worry twisting into frustration. She turned her glare on Jack, deciding he was a more appropriate target for it. "I thought you had his back? Where the hell were you?"

Jack ignored her, his eyes focused on Will. "Why *didn't* he hurt you?" he asked, ignoring Alana's little huff of outrage at the comment.

"What?" Will asked, startled.

"We found the knife by the door, which means based on your earlier account of what happened, he came at you without it," Jack said, before he nodded to the bruises scattered across the inside of Will's right wrist. "He wasn't trying to kill you. He was trying to subdue you."

Will flushed, then let out a breath. "I fit his victim profile, I guess," he said. "A beta male, younger than him and physically smaller. He saw the others as enemies. I imagine he was planning to take more time with me."

Alana let out a small, surprised gasp, then got to her feet, narrowing her eyes at Jack like she thought the entire situation was his doing. She glanced back Will, and held out a hand. "Come on, Will," she said. "If you're going to refuse treatment, at least let me drive you home."

Will only hesitated a moment before taking her hand, and allowing her to drag him to his feet. Even though Alana had a lot of traits in common with an alpha, she was still a beta, and one of the few people Will almost felt comfortable around.

She never put any pressure on him or asked him to perform, and seemed to go out of her way to put him at ease. That said, and considering how casual she kept their relationship, she was weirdly overprotective of him in a way he usually only encountered in alphas. She also generally took great care not to be alone with him.

As he dropped down in the passenger seat of her car, he realized this was probably the first time they had ever been truly alone together, and the small space of the car was made even more awkward by the fact that he was still covered in a killer's blood.

"This never should have happened," Alana said, as she pulled out into the road, glaring back at Jack from her rearview mirror like she could flay him alive with a look. "I told him not to drag you into this."

"I do make my own choices, you know," Will said, though it was mostly half-hearted. Jack did drag him out into the field—but the truth wasn't that simple, because he *let* Jack drag him into the field.

"You don't have to make that choice again, you know. Not ever," Alana answered quietly. "I'll talk to Jack. I can make sure he leaves you alone."

"Jack doesn't make my choices for me," Will told her, glancing at her, and added gently, "And neither do you."

"Fair enough," she sighed, relenting. "I just worry, Will. I've been afraid of something like this happening for a long time."

Will turned away to look out the window. He felt strangely numb, almost more worried about how little he was worried than about anything else. He did not regret killing Trevor Morton. For a moment there at the end, it had even felt right, and he wasn't sure if he was feeding off of Trevor's murderous urges or if maybe somewhere deep inside he had some of his own.

Alana let him sit quietly the entire drive, but when she pulled up to his house and turned off the engine, she couldn't hold back any longer. She turned to watch him carefully.

"Will, you took a life," she said softly. "You didn't have a choice, and you did the right thing, but you still took a life. That's not just going to go away just because you want it to."

He unsnapped the seatbelt and slipped out of the car, wanting nothing more than to see his dogs and then take an hour long shower. He leaned down to half-meet Alana's eyes, managing to be respectful while still mostly keeping them centered on her nose.

"Goodbye, Alana," Will told her, and then closed the door.

* * * * * *

Will had gone to class in the morning, all put back together, on the surface at least. He gave his lecture without having to meet any of his students in the eye, and he finally felt like himself again. He just wanted to put the whole case and his multilevel near-miss behind him. He should have known that he wouldn't be getting off that easily.

Alana was on the warpath, and Jack was feeling both guilty and pissed off, so of course he was going to be the one that had to deal with all the fallout.

"You can't be serious," Will said, frowning at the buttons of her cardigan in disbelief.

She had ambushed him, warned him of an ambush, and then been joined by Jack, who had helped her block his only way out. Not that Will would be so undignified as to run away from his mostly well-meaning friends. Probably.

"I just think it would be good for you," she continued, ignoring his growing irritation.

"I'm not seeing a psychiatrist," he snapped. "Therapy doesn't work on me."

"No, of course it wouldn't be anything official," Alana said soothingly. "I'm just introducing you to an old and dear friend, who happens to be a psychiatrist."

"I, however, *am* forcing you to see a psychiatrist," Jack interrupted. "Christ, Will, you shot the guy ten times. I want to be able to sleep at night."

"Then maybe you should be the one talking to the psychiatrist," Will told him. "I'm sure he'd be happy to prescribe something for you."

"Will," Alana chided, and he sighed, turning back to her in resignation.

If it was just Jack asking, he could have ignored it. It's not like Jack could threaten him with pulling him out of the field. Jack was the one that kept pulling him *into* the field. But Alana didn't care if she slept at night, she cared if *Will* slept at night, and that kind of concern wasn't as easy to dismiss.

"Fine," he said reluctantly. "A conversation."

"That's all I ask," Alana said, brightening up with a hopeful smile. "I think he can really help you."

Will had been practically frog marched down the hall by Jack, and then pushed through the open door of the agent's office. There was a man rising to greet them from the other side of the room. He gracefully stood from one of the guest chairs and stepped forward, offering his hand.

"You must be Will Graham," he said courteously, his voice emphasized by an accent that Will couldn't quite place.

"This is Dr. Hannibal Lecter, Will," Alana offered, when Will gave no response.

There was something aristocratic about the man, and he was dressed with an attention to detail that hinted to an obsessive-compulsive disorder. But all of this was dwarfed in comparison to the sheer *presence* of him.

Alana had conveniently left out that the psychiatrist would be an alpha, which he doubted was an oversight. It was not a typical alpha profession, but Will still should have known better than to just assume he would be a beta.

Trevor had been an uncomfortably powerful alpha, and Will had felt his power from ten feet away. Hannibal had far more control than Trevor, but somehow the sense of power was magnified to an extent that Will thought he might be getting seasick just by standing so close to him. He could sense the power within Hannibal like water rushing up against a dam, and he looked at Hannibal's outstretched hand with unease, wondering what Hannibal might sense when he looked back at him.

"He doesn't really like to touch," Jack explained, strangely solicitous considering his usual role of bullying and tough love in Will's life. Will glanced at him gratefully.

Jack was an alpha too, but didn't really feel much like one. He was so happily in love with his wife that it had tempered him to the point he really only left the slightest impression of a livewire in the back of Will's mind. There weren't really any other alphas Will would risk getting close to.

In other words: Jack was manageable. Hannibal was not.

Hannibal brought his hand down, seemingly taking no offense. "My apologies," he said. "I did not realize."

"It's fine," Will said, even though it didn't feel like it was. He'd read an admittedly dubious study once on omegas that had put forth a controversial idea. It had claimed that omegas had a sort of sixth sense, and could always tell a predator when there was one standing right in front of them. Like prey, they were programmed to run and hide.

Will looked at Hannibal and everything in him told him to *run*.

"I hear you're the one that caught Trevor Morton," Hannibal said, navigating Will's unease like it wasn't there. They were having a mostly one sided conversation, but Hannibal was obviously too polite to point it out. "That was quite a feat."

"I killed him," Will said, focusing on the knot of Hannibal's tie. It looked like it had been tied and then set against a level to make sure it hung just right. "That's why you're here."

"I'm here because Alana asked me to be here, and because she thought you might like to talk," Hannibal corrected. "There's no other reason. No ulterior motive. We can be as much or as little as you'd like."

That was a nice notion but neither Jack nor Alana would let him get away with as little as he'd like, and he very much doubted that Hannibal would, either. No one ever seemed to understand that Will understood the mind too well to be able to let someone else into his.

"Let's just keep it professional," Will decided. He could get through this. He knew all the answers to give to tick off all the boxes that need ticking. He just needed to make sure he was careful not to get too close to Hannibal Lecter in the process.

"There's no reason we cannot be friends," Hannibal tried.

Will watched him. Hannibal was proper and polite: *a place for everything and everything in its place.* He wouldn't like someone not adhering to the proper protocol, and maybe Will could turn him off just by being himself. "Maybe I don’t find you interesting," he said brazenly.

It didn't have the desired effect. Rather apart from being offended, Hannibal appeared amused, and even though his lips stayed turned down, he still seemed to be smiling.

"You will," Hannibal promised.

Chapter End Notes

Up Next: So Will got to keep his secret a little longer, but events are conspiring against him. And so is Hannibal.

a great and sudden change

Chapter Notes

Note: This chapter is a long one, to last you a bit since I have not yet started writing chapter four. The rest of the chapters will not be this long, don't worry. I just have a very specific set of events that are plotted for each chapter, and this one got a little out of control.
Well, okay, *probably* they won't be this long. ;-)

Also, an obligatory WARNING just in case:
I just want to be clear that while I wanted to put a twist on the most common trope of a/b/o dynamics, the gender inequality in this story is going to be just as prevalent in this as it is in most any a/b/o (gilded cages are still cages). Will is very much caught up in a paternalistic society, and though Will's POV (and of course, mine personally) do not endorse it, there are other characters that will. Please do not read if this upsets you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal Lecter's office was much like the man himself. There were high vaulted ceilings with books trailing up the walls to a second floor landing, and nothing was out of place. It was a seamless mix of classic decor and modern technology, and Will felt instantly out of place.

He was used to his small house in Wolf Trap, with all its cozy trappings and big, open spaces. Here he felt pinned in.

Hannibal had let him enter without pressing for anything further than his muttered greeting, and Will had gravitated at once towards the books. He found the ladder and started heading up, running his eyes over the well-tended spines of the Doctor's library. He wanted to pick one and find a corner to hide in, but Hannibal was not the sort one should let their guard down around.

He wondered if Hannibal knew why Will had taken the time to put himself so far out of his reach before their conversation even began. The OPA greatly limited contact with alphas when it came to unbonded omegas. Biology could be an irrepressible force, and alphas and omegas were like the contrasting poles of a magnet. Better not to risk too much proximity. It was probably their only edict that Will took care to follow himself.

Hannibal for his part was ignoring him, letting him familiarize himself with his surroundings, sort of like how a family will let a puppy loose to get him comfortable with his new home. The comparison annoyed him and finally forced him to move to the edge of the balcony to look down at Hannibal.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

Hannibal glanced up. "Just signing your psychological evaluation," he explained. "You are sane, and fully functional. Congratulations."

"You're rubber stamping me?" Will asked in surprise.

"Yes," Hannibal responded simply. "I'd rather we speak without all the paperwork getting in our way."

Will watched him with uncertainty. It was just on the edge of unethical, but he suspected Hannibal knew if backed into a corner Will would give rote, text-book answers to all of his questions. He was bending the laws of his profession in order to give his patient what he thought he truly needed. It was almost admirable, but Will suspected Dr. Lecter had additional motives that could not yet be seen.

Trevor Morton seemed to agree with him, as he stepped seamlessly from the shadows to hover behind Hannibal like an avenging angel. He had his own bloody pair of feathered wings now, and they stretched out towards the ceiling, even as they began dripping along the pristine floors. Trevor's bloodshot eyes watched Hannibal accusingly, like he suspected a rival.

"Will," Hannibal cut in sharply.

"Huh?" Will asked, tearing his eyes away from the vision.

"What are you looking at?" he asked.

"The pattern on your carpets," Will said, but did not clarify that he meant the swirling, dotted blood pattern being left behind by a man he had killed. It wouldn't matter if he'd already been rubber-stamped, that kind of confession could get him committed.

Hannibal glanced away, returning his attention to his desk instead. "Do you have trouble sleeping, Will?"

"No more so now than usual," Will replied.

"Meaning that you do," Hannibal derived.

"I get nightmares," Will admitted, angry at himself that Hannibal's trick with the 'off the record' session was working even as he knew exactly what the other man was doing.

"About Trevor Morton?" Hannibal asked, almost as though he could feel the ghost in the room with them, the dead man that was standing just behind him.

Unlike the visions he had when profiling, in his own dreams Will mostly got to be himself. It wasn't always better. He had woken up the previous night drenched in sweat, and had rushed to the bathroom to check in the mirror that there was no bonding mark on the back of his neck.

"No," Will answered. "Mostly about his victims."

If he counted himself among them, it was almost entirely the truth. Will often saw bodies in his dreams, sometimes laid out next to him. The night before last he had dreamt that Michael Keane was lying beside him, still as a porcelain doll, and Will had felt the moist feathers breaking beneath his hands and knees as he'd scrambled to escape from his blood-soaked bed.

"You theorized he saw you the same way as his victims, and that's why he did not kill you like the others," Hannibal said, a question cleverly disguised as a statement, but Will could hear the curiosity that lurked beneath it. It set him on edge.

"I don't exactly fit the profile, but he was desperate and there wasn't anyone else there. His original victims were all attractive and well-groomed, shorter than average with small builds. Beta males that looked more traditionally like omegas than betas. But, ultimately disposable, because they were not truly omegas," Will said bitterly.

Hannibal latched onto his tone like a shark on a scent. "Do you hold disdain for omegas, Will?"

"I hold disdain for their treatment," Will answered honestly. "They're plucked from their lives and forced into display cases the moment they present."

Hannibal stepped to the center of his office, his head tilted up to watch him. "You don't think it is important that we ensure their survival? Omega birthrates are at an all time low, and those most likely to bear omega children are omegas themselves."

"And what if they don't want children?" Will asked.

"The majority of people do, regardless of their gender. Why do you assume they don't?" Hannibal asked.

"Why do you assume they *do*?" Will countered.

Hannibal's eyes narrowed just slightly as he watched him, and Will could almost see the gears spinning in the slips of iris that were left. "I was wrong," he said. "It's not disdain in your voice. Generally, betas feel reverence for omegas, but you feel pity for them. Pity and fear."

It was a little too close to the truth, but Will had the perfect excuse. "I have an empathy disorder, remember?" he asked, glancing away from Hannibal's too-knowing eyes. "I can imagine what it's like. I find their lives…distressing."

"What a strange thing to say," Hannibal commented softly. "I often read the society pages of the New York Times. They do not seem to be suffering overmuch to me."

"They have no choice in what they are," Will insisted.

"I see," he said. "And do you feel pity also for a prince? He has no say in being born to royalty, and no way to get easily out of it. It is no different. It is one thing to say we are all

the same, but we are not all the same. We are all born into very different circumstances, and bear different responsibilities because of it."

"Luck of the draw," Will muttered, tracing his fingertips down the spine of a book that looked older than he was, "like a lightning strike."

"Just so," Hannibal agreed. "But that does not mean there are not exceptions. There are always exceptional people to whom the rules do not apply."

Will turned back to look down at Hannibal. "And do the rules not apply to you, Doctor?"

"Psychiatry certainly isn't considered a traditional alpha occupation," Hannibal said frankly.

Hannibal had obviously been discussing the details of Will's condition and past cases with Jack before this meeting—but Will had done his research on the doctor, too. "No, but an ER doctor is," he pointed out. "And really, positions of authority in general. I sincerely doubt anyone has accused you of being a disgrace as an alpha."

"Has someone accused you of being a disgrace as a beta?" Hannibal asked curiously.

"Not in so many words, no," Will said wryly. "Mostly because I don't think people put as many of their preconceptions on us."

"You feel that you are somehow less burdened than you would be had you been born an alpha or an omega," Hannibal guessed.

"I feel more burdened because I know what it's like to be an alpha or an omega," he clarified. "I can see through their eyes so clearly I sometimes think I forget to look through my own."

"It is a double-edged talent you've been given," Hannibal allowed. "But you have learned to make good use of it."

"And the FBI has made use of me," Will said, glancing back at Hannibal with a frown. "Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?" Hannibal asked calmly.

"You could have forced me into sessions with you," he explained, crossing his arms to shield himself. "You could have drug it out. I've been hounded all my life by psychiatrists that are fascinated by my condition."

"You will talk to me or you won't, Will," Hannibal said. "That has to be up to you. What would be the point of mandatory sessions if they would not do either of us any good?"

"And what good will this do?" Will asked.

"That's up to you," Hannibal told him.

* * * * * *

There was a strange sound seeping into the forefront of Will's mind, like a piece of cloth being torn apart down its middle. He wandered through his house to his kitchen, and found Hannibal kneeling there with a scalpel in his hand, meticulously separating a pair of feathered wings from a body laid out on the floor.

Hannibal dragged the scalpel across the last of the tendons, and pulled one wing free, before setting it aside and moving to the other. His mouth was moving as if he was speaking, but Will could not hear his voice, and found he could not speak himself.

He stepped forward and leaned over to peer down at the body, and realized he was looking at himself.

Will jerked awake with a soundless scream, panting breathlessly as reality closed back around him. He was left gasping, drenched in sweat, and it took him a moment to realize someone was knocking insistently on his front door. His dogs were all sitting around it quietly, wagging their tails, waiting for him to get up and answer it.

Guard dogs, they were not. They'd sell him out to anyone for a few treats.

"Just a minute," he shouted, searching for his old blue robe to hide the evidence of his night sweats. He pulled it up off the floor and wrapped it around himself, tying it tightly before opening the door.

Hannibal stood on the other side, calmly holding a glass food container in one hand. Seeing him so soon after the nightmare was disorienting, and for a moment Will imagined the doctor's hands were dripping with blood.

"Good morning, Will," Hannibal said politely. "I've brought you breakfast."

Will blinked at him, the incongruity of the situation robbing him momentarily of speech. "I'm sorry?" he finally said.

"It's a protein scramble," Hannibal clarified, as though the specifics of the breakfast in question were the issue at hand.

"Dr. Lecter, this is inappropriate," Will said, waking up enough to realize he was out in the middle of nowhere with one of the strongest alphas he had ever encountered. He briefly thought of slamming the door shut, but considering Hannibal's position, he could too easily use an action like that against him.

"It certainly would be if you were my patient," Hannibal agreed. "But you are not my patient. I am here only as a friend."

"You drove 65 miles to bring me breakfast in bed. As a friend," he said incredulously, stepping back only to avoid touching Hannibal as the other man slipped inside. "How do you even know where I live?"

"It is listed in your file," Hannibal explained, entirely shameless.

"Now I'm certain *that's* unethical," Will snapped, slamming the door behind them before bringing his hands around himself. Hannibal was surveying his living room slash bedroom with a long-suffering that implied a closer connection than the one that they had.

His dogs, the traitors, were trailing behind the doctor, hoping whatever was in that dish was for them.

"Unethical would be allowing you to continue not seeing to your own, simplest needs," Hannibal said. He headed towards the kitchen, and Will felt a chill go through him, like liquid mercury crawling up his spine.

"Wait—" he started, but Hannibal simply set the food in the center of Will's tiny kitchen table. Of course there was no body on his floor, no blood splattered across the walls. He swallowed hard, trying to think of a way to navigate out of this situation.

"It's only breakfast, Will," Hannibal said, his tone meant to appease him. "I assume you haven't eaten?"

"This isn't a good idea," Will said, staying near the edge of his kitchen tile, afraid to get too close. He took his suppressants religiously and they had never failed him, at least not until Trevor Morton, but he had not put on his cologne and he was covered in sweat. He wasn't sure what Hannibal might be sensing.

And it was obvious he was *sensing* something. An alpha did not drive across state lines to bring just anyone breakfast. He had seen this phenomenon before: alphas would become unconsciously possessive, bringing him gifts, trying to spend time with him. One such alpha's attentions was the whole reason Will had moved all the way out to Wolf Trap in the first place. If you cannot beat them, *avoid them*.

Hannibal glanced up at him. "I can see I woke you up," he said regretfully. "I apologize. I know you said you did not sleep well, and I would not have infringed upon you had I known. Please, feel free to do whatever you need to get ready for the day, but I must insist you at least try my scramble. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day."

"Right, fine," Will sighed. "Just…don't feed the dogs. They'll never leave you alone. Give me ten minutes."

Will escaped quickly to his bathroom, grabbing a pair of pants and button-up shirt as he went. He locked the door firmly behind him and then took a quick shower, washing off the evidence of his nightmare, before dousing himself in cologne. The smell was strong enough it was bothering even him, but that was the point.

Will rejoined Hannibal in the kitchen, fully dressed and feeling calmer, not commenting on Hannibal's twitch of disgust as the smell of the cologne reached him. He dropped down in the chair opposite Hannibal, and stared down at the bowl speculatively.

"I assure you it doesn't bite," Hannibal promised. "At least, not anymore."

Will rolled his eyes, but grabbed a fork, and started eating. "This is really good," he said, trying to reign in his surprise. "You made this yourself?"

"Yes," Hannibal said. "I enjoy cooking. I find it…therapeutic."

"You definitely don't follow the normal rules yourself," Will said, meaning it as a compliment, and Hannibal was astute enough to take it that way. They both knew if psychiatry was not generally an alpha profession, cooking almost never was. "It's not what I expected. I thought you believed everyone had their responsibilities to bear? You feel no driving need to be the stereotypical alpha?"

"On the contrary, I merely said everyone has their role to play. I do not feel they have any specific obligation whatsoever to actually play it," Hannibal explained. "It is the exceptions to the rules that I find most interesting. If you look at our history, almost everyone of note did something that their peers of the time would have said they shouldn't."

"But for there to be exceptional people, the majority must remain ordinary, is that it?" Will asked wryly.

"It is a rather irrefutable fact," Hannibal agreed. "Just because you, for example, find the lifestyle of an omega distressing, does not mean that all omegas find it so."

"And just because most alphas find cooking beneath them, doesn't mean you can't be a cook?" he asked dryly. "The issues are not similar at all."

"How do they differ?" Hannibal asked curiously.

"If you want to cook, you can," Will said. "If an omega doesn't like their life, there isn't much they can do about it."

"You think so?" Hannibal asked, deceptively casual. "You don't think if they really wanted to, they could find a way out of it?"

This was dangerous ground, and Will could not afford to believe Hannibal was unaware of the undercurrents to their conversation. "Thank you for the breakfast," he said politely. "But I __"

Will broke off as he heard his cellphone ringing, and pushed gratefully to his feet. "Excuse me," he said quickly, rushing into the living room to answer the call. "Hello?"

"I need you to come help with the search of Morton's house," Jack said without preamble. He already sounded irritated, and Will hadn't even said anything to get him riled up yet.

"I thought the case was closed?" Will asked with a frown. He figured Beverly and her team would catalog the house. There didn't seem to be any pressing reason to bring him in until they were finished. Will liked his crime scenes 'fresh', as Jack liked to put it, but he already understood all that he needed to about Trevor Morton.

"It is. Mostly," Jack said, before sighing roughly. "Look, I notified the OPA this morning of the case, and they weren't satisfied. I think they were more than a little annoyed they weren't

notified immediately. They want a thorough investigation to confirm Morton never tried, nor planned, to harm an omega, and to make sure he was working alone."

"Of course he was working alone," Will said disdainfully. The idea that someone with Morton's particular psychopathy could have been working as part of a team was beyond ridiculous.

"Dr. Chilton seems to think he might have been part of some pro-alpha group that's been working to take control back over omegas," Jack said. "He wants us to verify."

"That's ridiculous," Will said. "And Chilton's a quack."

Dr. Frederick Chilton had been a failure in private practice, then somehow managed to crawl his way up to being the psychiatric director of the OPA. Will figured his appointment was largely based on a series of loosely plagiarized studies Chilton had published as his own—he was the one that wrote the study comparing omegas to prey, originally posited by someone else entirely, and after its acclaimed reviews, the OPA turned around and handed the entire omega registry into his care.

"Yes, I know you're not a fan," Jack snapped. "But let's humor them, because we don't actually have a choice. Be here within the hour."

Jack hung up on him before he had a chance to argue further, and Will pushed his phone into his pocket in irritation.

"Another case?" Hannibal asked, standing in the doorway to the living room. He was holding his case container, already washed and dried, under one arm.

"Same old one," Will corrected. "I'm sorry to cut this short, but I need to go look at Morton's house with Jack. He lived way out in Kingstowne and Jack wants me there as soon as possible, so I really need to go."

"I'll drive you," Hannibal said at once, stepping towards the door as though the offer was already accepted.

"That's not necessary," Will said quickly.

"Nonsense, I insist," Hannibal said. "You look like you barely slept. There's nothing wrong with accepting help once and awhile, and I'm headed that way anyway."

Will couldn't find a graceful way out of it. Outright defying an alpha was always a dangerous proposition. Most didn't take it well, and while he had trouble imagining Hannibal losing control, there was no telling how the fact that he was an omega might be subconsciously affecting him.

Better to give in on this for now, and figure out a plan to deal with Hannibal later.

* * * * * *

Hannibal played Bach's Cello Suites on the drive. Will was hardly surprised by his choice in music, and could only be glad that it wasn't an opera. It was surprisingly relaxing, and Hannibal did not force any conversation. He was grateful for it, and used the time to try to think of how he could neatly extricate Hannibal from his life without causing a scene or drawing attention.

Hannibal had been right of course: Will *did* find him interesting, but he was far too dangerous to allow around him. Will hadn't managed to keep himself hidden this long to throw it all away for a few lively debates and some good home cooking.

"You can just drop me off," Will told him, as they neared Morton's house. "I can get one of the agents to drive me home."

"I was actually hoping to speak to Jack," Hannibal said. "But I promise I will not get in your way."

Will narrowed his eyes at being thwarted in getting clear of him yet again. He could not help but feel Hannibal knew exactly what he was trying to do, and had all of his countermoves already prepared. They pulled to a stop outside of Morton's home. It was a mostly ordinary suburban street, though Morton's house stuck out among them for its ill upkeep.

Two of the windows were boarded up entirely, and the grass had all gone brown. The off-white paint along the sides had begun peeling, revealing a strange, brownish green color underneath. All in all, he imagined it looked rather like most would imagine a serial killer's house should.

Trevor was waiting for him on the porch, leaning against the side of the house so that his bloody wings left an imprint there like a rather gruesome stamp. Will pulled his eyes away from the vision, seeing Hannibal break off to intercept Jack. He tossed a half-hearted wave over to Jack, then quickly headed for the house, grateful to finally put some distance between himself and Hannibal.

Even if that meant closing the distance between him and Trevor.

"Go on in," Trevor told him, his dulcet voice exactly as he remembered, and just as out of place, "After all, it's your home too."

Will turned away, banishing him from his mind, and stepped inside. The house was rather bare at first glance. There was a television and single couch, a table in the corner beside a small kitchen. There were not many possessions. It did not feel like a home.

"Will," Price called, as he stepped out from one of the hallways. "Jack wants you in the basement. It's the goldmine. Beverly's already down there."

Will nodded to him and then turned towards the hall Price had motioned to. There was an open door with shadowed stairs leading down into a brightly lit room. The sight of it filled him suddenly with a fierce, all-consuming dread that made him want to turn right back around.

He moved forward, bracing a hand on the wall as he took the stairs down one at a time. He could see Beverly off to the side below, cataloging a shelf of books, but even her presence couldn't put a dent in his unease. There was a large four-poster bed as the centerpiece to the room: a white comforter almost certainly filled with down, white silk sheets, and matching white mesh netting hanging all around it from the four posts. It was not something Trevor Morton would have bought for himself.

This was a prison in waiting.

The metal hook anchored into the wall beside the bed confirmed it: a long, interlocking silver chain was laid out on the floor and attached to a padded leather ankle cuff. It would allow whoever wore it to reach the four corners of the room, but not travel up more than a single step of the stairs.

"Nice, right?" Bev asked him, snorting as she looked back towards the bed. "This guy was fucked up. I can't decide if this looks like the set for a porno or a horror film. Luckily, it doesn't look like he ever found someone nice enough to bring home to mother."

Will didn't laugh, not when he could see so clearly exactly what this room was intended for; and *who*. The walls had all been paneled and most likely insulated. The floors were carpeted with a plush, heavy carpet. All the money Trevor had, he had sunk into this single room.

There was strange, oppressive smell emanating from somewhere inside it. It was making Will nauseous, but he forced himself to step further in. "He thought he was making a home," he said quietly. "He didn't think he was doing anything wrong. He expected them to be grateful he was willing to waste his time with them. But in the end they were never good enough. He was saving this for someone special."

"Shocking that he wasn't able to find someone," Bev said. "He seemed like such a keeper to me."

Will reached up to brush his hair out of his eyes, frowning at how damp it felt. He realized he was sweating all along his hairline and sucked in a startled breath. He could feel himself flushing as he felt an uncomfortable heat took hold, and he wondered if something was wrong with the ventilation down here. He shook it off and tried to keep moving, turning to look at the bookshelf along the back wall. It had been stocked with old classic novels and small knick-knacks: a teddy bear, pen and paper, board games. Something to keep his chosen mate amused when left alone.

He reached out to examine one of the books, and realized his hand was shaking. He pulled it back against his chest, trying to still the movement, but he was starting to have trouble breathing. "God, what is that smell?" he asked.

The room began to shift beneath his feet. He reached out a shaking hand to brace himself against the wall, but it didn't help.

"I know, it's awful. Turns out Morton had a supply of Alphamiticin, which fits your profile pretty dead on," Bev explained. "One of the canisters had a leak and it hasn't dissipated yet,

but don't worry about it. It's harmless to everyone except omegas, and last I checked, there weren't any omegas in Virginia."

Will didn't answer, trying to run the words back in his mind to make sense of them, trying to remember what Alphamiticin *was*, and failing on all fronts. He had the sudden urge to just lay down, to curl up and try and get away from this *heat*…

"Will?" Bev called, frowning over him. "Are you okay over there? You don't look so good. Will?"

His hand slipped on the wall and then he was falling, and Beverly was yelling, and none of it mattered because it was obviously too late for him. He was on *fire*, and he couldn't imagine coming back from this. Beverly should get out while she still could.

"Will?" Bev asked, dropping down beside him and turning his face towards her. Her hands burned like they were branding him, but he wasn't strong enough to pull away. "This can't be happening. Will? Will, I need you to tell me what's wrong."

Will could feel his eyes rolling upwards into his head as Beverly got increasingly panicked. He wished he could reassure her, but he wasn't actually sure he wasn't dying.

"Price! Don't let anyone down here! Damn it," she cried. "Make sure you keep any alphas out, do you hear me? I don't care if you have to taze their asses. And I need you to call for an ambulance. Now!"

Will couldn't hear Price's response, but he did hear Hannibal.

"I don't think it would be wise to keep me out, Miss Katz," Hannibal said calmly, from the top of the stairs. "The ambulance is at least seven minutes out, and he needs help now."

He could feel Beverly's indecision as she curled her hands in his shirt, helpless to help him, and out of her depth. Hannibal always seemed like a good idea in theory. "No," he tried to say, reaching back for her, but he either didn't quite manage it or she didn't hear him.

"Let him through," she called reluctantly.

Hannibal appeared almost instantly beside Beverly, expressionless and professional. The only sign that something was off was that his own hands were slightly trembling, too.

"It must be the Alphamiticin, he was fine one moment, and then—" Bev started. "But I don't know why it would affect him."

"Yes, you do," Hannibal stated, matter-of-fact. "It's why you had the foresight to bar the door and did not want to let me in. Under ordinary circumstances, that would have been the exact right thing to do for an omega going into heat."

Beverly turned to watch Will with stunned disbelief. "But how is that possible?"

"Will is very clever," Hannibal said, as he gently tugged at Will's eyelids to try and measure his pupils. "I imagine if he wanted to keep a secret he would find a way to do it. If not for

this, we might never have known."

Hannibal's hands were cool on his skin, the one relief he had from the unbearable heat. "Please—" Will started, but he wasn't sure what he was asking for. *Please – stop, Please – don't*. He felt like his brain was melting out his ears.

"We've got to get him out into the fresh air," Hannibal decided. "Now."

"The perimeter isn't protected enough," Bev said in frustration. "He'll be too exposed."

"Better that than to allow him to get exposed to more of the Alphamiticin," Hannibal snapped, reaching out to gather Will up in his arms without waiting for approval. He lifted him gently, with one arm under his neck and the other under his knees.

"It's alright, Will. Everything is going to be alright now," Hannibal told him, but despite the words, Will could feel there was something sinister in the pacing of his speech. "I'll take care of you."

The last thing he saw before it went dark was Hannibal's face, hovering blearily in front of him. As consciousness faded, he was left with the strange, stray thought that the doctor appeared far more pleased than he did concerned.

* * * * * *

When awareness started to return, Will's first panicked thought was that he really wished it wouldn't.

He felt sore all over, his body so tired that he almost wasn't able to lift his arm high enough to see the IV running into the vein in his left wrist. He could feel something cold around his other wrist, and forced his head to turn so he could look. It was encased in a thin gold band, similar to a medic-alert bracelet but higher quality and solid all the way around. He frowned and lifted it closer. *Omega – 25634* was engraved across its shining surface. There was no latch that he could see, no way for him to take it off. It was the type of identification bracelet they generally reserved for underage omegas that couldn't be trusted not to lose it or take it off.

He'd been registered.

Feeling suddenly sick, Will tilted himself over the side of the bed. A bucket appeared out of nowhere, and he grasped it weakly, throwing up what little was left in his stomach.

Someone was brushing back his hair, gently prying the bucket from his hands when he was done. He blinked his vision clear and saw that it was Alana.

"Alana," he whispered, unsure if he was grateful or worried to see such a familiar face.

"Give yourself a second," she said softly, helping him lay back.

He fell back against the bed to take in his surroundings. After a moment, he realized that while he may have been out long enough to be registered without his knowledge, he was still

in a public hospital. They hadn't had a chance to move him to one of the secure Omega Care Centers. He was pretty sure the closest one was two states away, which meant his condition had most likely been too precarious to risk the trip.

"I'm guessing everyone knows," he finally said. His voice sounded hoarse and weak, and he belatedly realized there was a cannula in his nose.

"Oh, Will," Alana said tiredly. She looked like she had been crying and probably hadn't slept for awhile. She also looked like she wanted to hug him, but knew him too well to try it. "Yes. They know. Jack wanted to visit, but this whole wing of the hospital has been closed off. They aren't allowing any unmated alphas inside."

"Jack is mated," Will said weakly.

"It's..." she started, then sighed. "You know that's not what I meant."

He did. She meant any alphas that weren't already mated to another omega, which considering the population statistics, was pretty rare. Omegas were basically the Holy Grail to alphas, and they could be completely and wholly in love, and forget their love entirely when confronted with an omega in heat. Scientists liked to theorize it was a survival mechanism, and it was often cited as evidence for the theory that love was actually nothing more than a chemical reaction.

"I went into heat," he said, filling in the blanks.

"Sort of," Alana said hesitantly. "The Alphamiticin trigged your heat, but it didn't interact well with your apparent habit of self-medicating." He didn't miss the censure in her voice, but he wasn't going to be sorry about what he'd done. "They think Trevor Morton was planning to take an omega captive and force them into heat. But you'd pretty much already figured that out."

He hadn't figured Trevor would be so well equipped, and the thought tickled at the back of his mind. "How mad is everyone?" Will asked.

Alana sighed. "It's not…we're not mad, exactly, Will," she said. "But why didn't you tell me?"

"What would you have done?" he challenged quietly.

"I—" she started, but lost steam before she could even finish her thought.

He knew what she would have done, and so did she. It was what anyone would have done, up to and possibly even including another omega, if Will had ever met one.

She would have handed him off to the OPA without a second thought.

"Would that have been so bad?" she asked after a moment, reading the truth in his eyes. "Do you even realize what a dangerous game you've been playing? What about Morton? What if he had found out what you were? What would he have done? Come on, Will. You probably know better than anyone."

He did, and not all of it was speculation, but Alana never needed to know what Trevor had figured out before he died. "He would have claimed me, and bonded me against my will," he admitted. "He would have locked me up in his basement where no one else could see or touch or talk to me ever again." He let out a breath, and then added, "And he would have stopped killing."

He turned to watch her defiantly then. "And if he didn't figure me out, he would have just gutted me just like he did everyone else. We can all die, Alana. We can all suffer. My life shouldn't be worried about more than anyone else's."

"That's naive, Will," she said. "You know it isn't that simple."

"I don't owe anything to anyone because of how I was born," he insisted. "And no one owes anything to me."

"Is that why you hid this?" she demanded. "You thought you would be made to pay for something that's not your fault?"

"Don't psychoanalyze me, Alana," he warned.

"I'm asking as a friend. I'm concerned, as a friend," she said emphatically. "You need to understand what's at stake. They've made you a ward of the OPA, officially." She paused for a moment, studying him carefully. "And I can't say I entirely disagree with the judgment at the moment."

"Fuck," Will said tiredly, lifting a hand to run it over his eyes.

He remembered a story a few years ago about a young omega being a ward of the OPA after they were caught abusing recreational drugs. They went in unmated—and only made it out after they were bonded to an alpha.

The chances of them letting an unstable omega with an empathy disorder that had spent the last *twenty years* hiding what he was back out on his own were fairly non-existent. More likely he would be a ward until he bonded, if he ever did.

The OPA may have been formed with all the best intentions, but that didn't change that it was run by alphas doing what they thought best for omegas. It also didn't help that their current head psychiatrist was Chilton, of all people. Despite being lauded as an omega expert by nearly everyone, Will was uniquely qualified to know that pretty much everything Chilton spouted was total nonsense.

"I have to get out here," he decided, pulling the cannula free and reaching for the IV, feeling the panic bubbling up inside of him like a living thing. Alana reached out to still his hands, watching him with her large, sad eyes.

"You can't, Will," she said. "They have the wing on lock down. There are OPA agents everywhere. And even if you could manage to get past them, which in your condition, you couldn't, there's no where you could go."

She let him go, and reached behind herself to grab something off the table. After a moment, he realized it was a remote. "I was going to wait to show you this, but I think you need to know," she explained. "There's been non-stop coverage all night."

She clicked on the TV, and Freddie Lounds snapped into existence. She was wearing a plaid peacoat and with matching earmuffs placed over her curly red hair. He could make out just enough of the building standing behind her to get a sinking feeling about what was coming.

"I'm in front of the Virginia Medical Center," Freddie said, wearing a smirk hidden by a veneer of concern so thin that Will doubted it would take an empath to see through it. "For those of you just joining us, we have received confirmation that an omega has just been added to the registry. Unlike past additions, this is not the usual celebratory occasion of an adolescent in their first heat, but a thirty-four year old special consultant to the FBI. If you're wondering how the FBI didn't happen to notice they were working with an omega for the last ten years, well, so am I."

The screen split, displaying Will's FBI identification photo along the left side. He wasn't wearing his glasses, and hadn't grown out his facial hair at the time, making him look younger than he was. He winced as he saw it: it was like looking at a picture of someone else.

"The OPA has already launched a full scale investigation into how something like this could have happened. While there have been cases of unreported omegas in the past, usually perpetrated by the parents, the longest an omega had remained off the registry until now was five years after their first heat. Will Graham has, presumably, somehow managed to keep his status unknown for the last twenty years. His parents are both deceased, which complicates the investigation."

His still photo was replaced suddenly with footage from outside Morton's house. Will could just make out the blurry figure of Hannibal carrying him from the house to place him gently on the lawn, Beverly and the others quickly moving to surround him and try to hold back the press.

Freddie continued her narration, sounding almost gleeful. "As you will recall, his status was discovered due to an Alphamiticin leak during the course of an investigation—"

Will swallowed hard and weakly reached out to take the remote from Alana's hand, before shutting off the television. Alana watched him worriedly. "How did he get it?" Will asked.

"We don't know how all the details got leaked yet," she said softly. "But the entire world knows who you are now, Will. There's no running from this."

"No, that's not what I mean," he said, frowning. "Trevor Morton was a nobody. He worked for minimum wage out in the middle of nowhere. How did he get his hands on Alphamiticin? It's one of the most regulated drugs in existence. They only use it for omegas with heat sickness. It's not even stocked in standard hospitals."

"Will, you're not working the investigation any longer, okay? You don't have to worry about that," Alana told him.

"It doesn’t make sense," he insisted. "Where's my phone? I have to call Jack."

"They have it someplace safe," she promised, which meant he wasn't getting it back any time soon.

"Then give me yours," he said.

"I'll talk to Jack," she said instead. "I'm sure they're already looking into it, but I'll check. Okay?"

He didn't want to ask again and force her to say no outright; somehow, he thought that last betrayal might break him. Instead, he just nodded and ran a hand through his hair. He wasn't as covered in sweat as he expected, which made him suspect sponge baths, and nearly made him sick again.

"Will, we need to talk about this, okay? Because if you don't talk to me, you're going to have to talk to Chilton," Alana said. "If you ever want them to overturn your status as a ward—"

"We both know the only way they're going to do that is if I bond with an alpha," Will said. "It doesn't matter what I say." He glanced over at her, wondering if their friendship could survive this. "And you think this is best thing for me, don't you?"

"I think you've been self-destructive for a long time now, and I think you need help," she admitted. "That's not new, Will. I've never made a secret of that. I've been offering to help you all along."

"And now it's no longer optional," he said tiredly.

"No, it's not," she agreed, but to her credit didn't sound the least bit smug.

He had to fight back the urge to start crying, and realized his hands were still shaking. It had to be the withdrawal, and the remains of his heat, or a combination of them both. It wasn't as though Will was known for being stoic and in control, but there was more than one reason he took suppressants. He liked his own particular brand of chaotic control.

"You haven't just been hiding from the world, you know," Alana said after a moment. "You've been hiding from us, too." She sighed, and part of him felt bad for putting her through this—but most of him was angry that the world had put them all in this position in the first place. "And that's not even touching on the fact that your empathic disorder requires an entirely different treatment for an omega than it would for a beta."

"I'm not sure there's too many case studies of an omega with an empathy disorder," he responded dryly. Omegas were generally the most empathic of the genders, but had an innate, built-in control. Their power tended to be subtle, almost non-existent, refined to fine art. An omega with an empathy disorder was sort of counter intuitive, and if anything, the disorder had acted as his best camouflage.

"And have you ever considered that your suppressants might actually be a contributing factor to your disorder? Where have you been getting them?" she asked quietly, deceptively trying

to sneak the question in. He knew it would be the first thing the OPA asked him, but he hadn't expected it to come from her. "They're heavily regulated and not exactly sought after on the black market considering the small number of people that can make use them."

He turned his head to watch her. "Is that my friend asking, or Dr. Bloom, the consultant to the OPA?"

She flushed, caught out, and immediately started to backtrack. "Will—" she began.

"I'm not stupid," he reminded her. "They wouldn't have let you in here without a chaperone if you weren't on their payroll."

"I have worked with them before, yes," she admitted. "That doesn't mean I'm not your friend. I used my relationship to them to get in to see *you*, not the other way around." She frowned at him, looking half-apologetic, and half-disapproving. "And you never answered my question about the suppressants. The test results will come back soon enough, so there's nothing to be gained by keeping it secret anymore."

That was true, and yet this still felt like putting the final nail in his own coffin. It wasn't as though he'd be able to get his hands on his illegal suppressants anymore, or even need to, really, since omegas on the registry could easily get them with a simple request.

But it was a secret that he'd guarded so closely for so long, it still felt like giving in to give it up.

"Will," she urged gently.

"They're alpha suppressants," he admitted. "The base ingredients are the same, and they're much easier to get."

"What?" she asked, looking worried and a little scandalized. He wasn't sure what she had been expecting.

"It's like you said," he told her, giving a little half shrug, "there's not exactly a black market for omega suppressants. Any omega on the registry can get them whenever they want."

"But the side effects—" she said worriedly.

"They actually helped me to hide," Will admitted. Male omegas generally didn't have facial hair, and if they did it was always a soft, light dusting that was all but invisible. He knew the alpha suppressants had interfered with his hormones a bit, and one of the consequences was that he had managed to grow a more than decent 5 o'clock shadow. He hadn't actually minded it at all.

"You might have done permanent damage to yourself," Alana realized, looking mildly ill. "How long?"

"I presented when I was fifteen," he told her. His father had been out of town. Will had woken up in so much pain he thought he was dying, but then it had turned into something else. He'd spent the weekend shaky and off kilter, reading about omega presentations online

for hours before finally admitting to himself what he was. Then he'd stolen some of his father's suppressants. His dad always forgot to take them, and Will had known they wouldn't be missed, but hadn't been sure they'd work. But when his father came home, he never noticed anything amiss. "I've been taking them ever since."

"They aren't meant to be used that long by alphas, let alone by an omega," she told him reproachfully. "Have you ever gone off them? Have you even had a heat since your first?"

"No," Will admitted. "Unless you want to count this one."

Alana glanced away, probably cataloguing everything he'd said for her report. He didn't exactly mind, because she was right. Better to talk to her than Chilton.

"I can't go back to work, can I?" he asked. He knew the answer, but he still had to ask.

"No," she agreed. "They can't technically restrict you on basis of your gender, but you lied on your application, and that's grounds for dismissal. They don't actually want to fire you, mostly because it would make for even worse publicity, so they're asking for your resignation, instead."

Will thought about that, not quite sure if he wanted to give it to them. Then again, it would probably end up being simpler that way for him, too.

"They're taking a lot of heat right now for not getting you to help sooner, or noticing you were an omega," she explained with a sigh. "Well, you saw Freddie Lounds' report. They're starting to realize that you've managed to somehow put off your required physical for the last ten years, using the loophole that you were never cleared as a full agent." She raised an eyebrow at him, obviously unwilling impressed by the depths of his deception. "I'm sorry, but even if they could somehow make it work legally, they'd never take on the liability of working with you again."

"Right," he sighed. "So what's going to happen to me then?"

Alana crossed her legs, obviously more comfortable dealing with the facts. "They're going to transfer you to the nearest OPA hospital for a psychiatric and medical evaluation. They won't let me be your psychiatrist, obviously. They think I'm too close to be the one on record."

"It's going to be Chilton, isn't it?" Will asked with a sigh.

"I doubt he's going to delegate this," Alana admitted.

"Alana, my dogs—" he started, feeling the panic rising again.

She reached out and clasped her hands over his, stilling them. "No one is going to take your dogs from you," she promised. "Please understand, you're not being punished."

"They're going to take them to the OPA with me?" he asked, feeling a rush of unexpected relief.

"Of course they will, I've already arranged it," she said. "There's rarely more than two omegas at the hospital at a time. You'll have an entire floor to yourself. They'll bring you anything you want."

"How about an AMA?" he asked bitterly.

"Within reason," Alana corrected. "You're not alone in this, okay? Jack is working to get permission for visitation and Hannibal has already put himself on a list to be vetted. If approved, he can see you as soon as they're sure your heat is fully over and you're through the last of your suppressant withdrawal." She paused for a moment, then added, "I mean, with a chaperone, of course."

Will wasn't sure he actually wanted to face Hannibal after everything that had happened, but the thought of suppressant withdrawal worried him more. "Just have them give me some suppressants," he said.

"About that," she started cautiously, and he just knew he wasn't going to like where this was going. "They aren't going to clear you for suppressants until you've been fully checked out by OPA's own medical team."

Will felt himself go cold. "Access to suppressants is an omega right," he insisted.

"Except in cases where it may endanger that omega's health," she said. "This qualifies."

Will pressed his eyes shut for a moment, biting down on the worry. Almost as long as he'd been omega, he'd been on suppressants. He wasn't sure he knew who he was without them.

"Will, I hesitate to bring this up," Alana started, "but I want you to know you've also been assigned a security detail. It's a little bigger than the usual OPA detail considering the publicity you're getting."

"You're kidding," Will said, opening his eyes to look back at her in disbelief.

"I'm afraid not," she said. "There's a full team of ten beta agents, and two are trained medical assistants that are authorized to sedate you if they feel you've become a threat to yourself." She let out a breath. "It was at Chilton's insistence. I'm sorry, I couldn't talk him out of it."

"A threat to myself," he deadpanned. "Which we both know will be any time I don't do what they want. Dress it up however you want, Alana, I'm still being taken prisoner."

"It wouldn't be like this if you had registered at your presentation," Alana said. "But they don't understand why you would hide this. They're afraid you might hurt yourself, or try to run."

He supposed it would be too much to ask for someone to understand. Omegas were generally *envied*. People wanted to be them the same way they wanted to win the lottery. He was probably considered even crazier than he had been before, because who wouldn't want this?

"Please just leave me alone now, Alana," Will told her tiredly.

She left silently, and he closed his eyes as he heard the door click behind her. He pulled at the registry bracelet, but it was unforgiving.

No matter what he tried, he could not slip it off.

Chapter End Notes

Up Next: Hannibal drafts a love letter to Will, but doesn't use words to do it. Chilton thinks Will's going to make his career, but Jack would rather get Will back to his own.

with a fearful trill

Chapter Notes

> Note: Um, so it sort of happened again? This ended up being another long one, and what's sad is this actually me trying to keep them *short*. Also, for those of you that wanted to punch someone the last chapter, you'd better break out your boxing gloves. ;-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Trevor Morton joined him on the flight to the OPA hospital.

It was a private plane, with only Dr. Chilton, the beta guards, and the pilot. Dr. Chilton had arrived earlier that evening to see him safely back to the New York Omega Care Center. They had gone out the back of the hospital, near midnight, to slip past the reporters and civilians camped out with posters all along the main street. Upon his arrival, Chilton had courteously introduced himself as though they'd never before met. Will supposed that either Will Graham, beta profiler, was not as memorable as Will Graham, fugitive omega, or Chilton was trying his hand at a mind game. He suspected the latter.

Considering the fact that Will spent his spare time getting into the minds of killers, and still had one of them rattling around in his brain like an uninvited guest, Chilton was going to be sadly disappointed if he thought any of his amateur tricks were going to work. Will was careful to keep from even deigning to look at the doctor, who for his part was watching *him* like he thought he was going to jump from the plane without a parachute. He'd even had him escorted to the plane by the arm like a disobedient child. Dr. Chilton was what Will had been known in the past to call a beta with delusions of alpha. He had a false air of authority that he wore around himself like a cloak, but did not have the strength of character needed to back it up.

It was a bad omen of his new circumstance that he actually preferred Trevor's company to the rest of them. The dead man sat calmly across from him, his bloody wings folded in, watching with a knowing smirk. His eyes were slowly becoming a pale, milky blue, as though Will's subconscious was allowing his vision to decay in pace with Trevor's far off buried body. It should have disturbed him, but it was weirdly comforting instead.

Maybe it was because for better or worse, Trevor was a familiar face. The bodyguards he had been assigned were all stone-faced and over six feet, watching him without *seeing* him. They were looking for any clues he was going to do something he shouldn't, or someone was going to do something they shouldn't near him, and it was a strange, uncomfortable feeling to be watched as though he were some expensive showpiece that no one really had a use for but didn't want to get lost.

There was only one guard that did not seem to be watching him, and he was the one that kept catching Will's own eye. He was one of the medical assistants, with a small nametag that read *Brown, Matthew* pinned to the pocket of his white shirt. Matthew kept his own eyes on the wall, on the floor, anywhere but on the people around him. Will knew such tricks well: he didn't want to be noticed.

It made Will notice.

"You see us," Trevor whispered conspiratorially, "but that means we can see you, too."

Will could see Chilton watching him suspiciously, and willed Trevor away, unable to afford the distraction. He ran a hand through his hair irritably at nearly being caught out, though he was at least usually sane enough not to respond to his hallucinations, he was still off-kilter enough that he'd had more than one near miss.

The entire flight he felt like he was sitting there in someone else's skin. They'd shaved off his beard at the hospital, and without any of his old suppressants he doubted it would grow back. He felt exposed and weirdly vulnerable—*unmasked*. They had brought him new clothes when they came to retrieve him, dressing him in too-expensive slacks and a blue button-down shirt, with a pea coat that looked more like it belonged on a billboard advertisement than it did on him. He was pretty sure it cost more than his own wardrobe all together.

It was almost enough to make him wish he had taken Alana up on her offer to come with him, but that felt too much like giving in. She thought he was so broken, that she needed to be there to hold his hand, and he'd rather fall on his own than prove her right.

If nothing else, the flight was at least blissfully short, chosen over going by car for security reasons and convenience more than anything. But even as the plane landed and everyone began moving, dread kept him from standing to join them.

In the hospital he had been able to pretend, if only to himself, that nothing had changed. He'd been sick and was getting better, and would be home soon, with Winston and the rest of his pack. There wouldn't be any pretending here.

"Will," Chilton said, leaning over him, all conscientious and kind with an insidious greed tainting everything from underneath. Will knew Chilton was going to write a paper on him: he'd probably already chosen the title. People would probably believe it, too. "It's time to go."

Two of the larger guards flanked him on the way out. He wasn't quite sure what they expected him to do, but Will was not one to make some fruitless effort to escape simply to make a point. Without extensive planning it would be bound to fail, and only serve to make security tighter in the end. No, he would play along for now, and he would bide his time.

"Have you ever been to New York, Will?" Chilton asked, once he'd been ushered into the backseat of a waiting limo. The two guards settled between him and the doors on either side, as the smirking Chilton sat down on the bench seat across from him. "It's rather beautiful this time of year."

What Will wasn't going to do was *small talk*. Chilton's use of his first name grated on his nerves. When they had first met years ago at a criminology conference at Quantico, he'd been Mr. Graham to Chilton then. The added familiarity along with his refusal to acknowledge their past acquaintance was a slap in the face. Chilton either wanted to antagonize him, or was an even worse psychiatrist than Will had been led to believe.

Ignoring the overture at polite conversation, Will looked up to stare balefully at the collar of Chilton's shirt. "When can I get my phone back?"

"That's not really up to me," Chilton said, his voice sounding falsely cultured, intentionally smoothed out. He'd obviously worked to bury an accent, so unlike Hannibal, who prided himself on his. "It's part of the investigation."

The investigation being the investigation into *Will*. There may not have been any handcuffs, and the limo was top of the line, but this was obviously a prison transport in a clever disguise. There would never be any formal charges, of course. The last time an omega had been charged with a crime was in 1989, and that was only because the omega had killed another omega.

But there were no laws to protect him and no recourse he could take against being made a ward indefinitely. In the matter of protection over an omega, the OPA was given full discretionary power—no appeals, no opposition. They were the only one of their kind.

"And my wallet? The other things I asked for?" he asked. Alana had told him before he left on the flight that his dogs were already on the way and would be in New York before him, but that the OPA had not allowed her to pack up any of the other possessions he'd requested. "Are they part of this investigation too?"

"Your wallet?" Chilton said, smirking. "Whatever do you need that for?"

"My accounts are still mine, right? My house?" he demanded.

"Of course," Chilton agreed. "It's being held in trust for you."

"So why can't I have my credit cards?" he asked.

Chilton sighed as though Will was being unnecessarily difficult. "Because you could only use them to make approved purchases," he explained, falsely patient, "and any approved purchases will be paid for by the OPA." Chilton tilted his head as he watched him. "I assure you that we can afford it. The OPA is well funded."

"Yes, I'm well aware of where you get your funds," Will said dryly.

The laws preventing omegas from being forced into relationships were extensive, and any alpha proven to have forced a bond on an omega—or having abused a bond after it was formed—was indiscriminately sentenced to death. Though it was exceedingly rare, Will could recall one high profile case within the last decade. It was meant to be a deterrent, but more importantly, death was the only way to break a bond.

But that didn't mean omegas couldn't be manipulated and tricked into a fully binding, *'consensually'* formed bond.

Wealthy alphas gave the OPA obscene amounts of money with the understanding that they would be the first ones on the list to interact with any newly registered omegas, and were automatically put on the guest lists for any of the unveiling or annual OPA parties.

Will was trying not to think about them throwing an unveiling ball for him. The thought was like a time bomb in the back of his mind, threatening to hurt him if he let it loose on the rest of his mind.

"Yes, well, that's really not something you need to let concern you," Chilton said. "All you need to know is the OPA will provide you with whatever you need."

"And who decides what I need?" Will asked.

"I suppose that would be me," Chilton said, as though he expected Will to be grateful, or to change his attitude to gain his favor. Will wondered for the first time what another omega might be like. Would they be fine with this? Was this just how it was?

Because Will had been dealing with it less than three days and he was considering lunging over one of the guards to throw himself out of the moving car.

"When we arrive we'll take you to your floor," Chilton said. "You were scheduled to receive a medical intake exam by our on-site doctor, Dr. Olsson, but he is currently unavailable. Really, I think it's for the best. You can rest as soon as we get you home, and we'll worry about the details tomorrow. You don't look well."

Will knew he was still shaky from his pseudo-heat, but it probably hadn't helped that he hadn't been able to sleep since he was discovered, either. Rest actually sounded nice, but he doubted he would be able to do it where he was going. Not for the first time, he wished he had been allowed to go home.

He looked out the window when they came to a stop in front of the hospital, and could not believe what he saw. There were people being held back by police lines, shouting out to him and holding signs that said 'we love you, Will!' or 'welcome home.' They were celebrating—it was surreal.

"We didn't confirm you would be coming here, of course," Chilton explained, "but it was the logical choice. They've been here over twenty-four hours waiting for you to arrive."

Will felt hollowed out as he watched the screaming crowd. It spoke to a complete misunderstanding of the situation. He hadn't been *rescued*.

Chilton was speaking to the guards, in short quick commands, as he ran his eyes over the crowds, and then they were pulling him out onto the street. They kept him hidden by a human wall of bodyguards as they guided him right through the front doors of the hospital, but even leaving the crowd behind didn't really bring relief.

The Omega Care Centers were all state of the art facilities, and he knew security would be tight. He wouldn't have to worry about any of his misguided fans outside getting in, but he also didn't know when he'd ever make it out.

Chilton ushered him into an elevator at the back, and they got in with only two of the guards accompanying him. Matthew, and one of the anonymous no-name suits. Chilton had to have his thumbprint scanned before the elevator would move, which would make using it to leave on his own problematic.

The elevator climbed all the way up to the thirteenth floor, and then the doors clicked open. Will paused at what he saw, and had to be nudged by Matthew before he would leave the elevator car. It was not at all what he was expecting.

He thought this was a hospital, but it looked more like a millionaire's penthouse. The décor was nice enough even Hannibal would approve of it, with high ceilings and marbled floors stretching out from the entryway. He could see one hall opening up into a massive indoor pool, and in the other direction there was a greenhouse garden.

He might have been more impressed if he didn't recognize that the reason this place had everything he could ever need was because he wasn't meant to *leave*.

"This whole floor is yours, of course," Chilton was telling him. "You are free to go anywhere you like, but the guards will be monitoring you and the elevator is, of course, forbidden." He led the way straight down from the entranceway, to a set of large darkly stained oak double-doors. "But this is your bedroom, which will be your private residence."

He pulled the doors open with a flourish, obviously expecting Will to be impressed. Will was just getting ready to disappoint him, when he heard the excited yipping that heralded his loveable group of strays. He couldn't help but light up as he saw them, stepping past Chilton to drop down on the floor and let them jump all over him.

Will made sure to pay special attention to each and every one of them, and he was so preoccupied with them that it took him awhile to realize everyone was watching him. Chilton had stepped inside, wearing a fond, almost doting expression that he didn't think was directed at the dogs. The other two were hiding smirks by examining the floor.

Will felt himself flush, angry that even this reunion felt like a violation. "You said this was my room, right?" he asked.

"Yes, it's yours," Chilton agreed. "As is everything in it. I want you to take tonight to get rested and familiarize yourself with your new home."

"And if I asked you to get out of my room," Will asked, "do you have to honor that request?"

Chilton looked flustered, and slightly reproachful. "Well, I would, of course—"

Will stood up, and pressed his hand to Chilton's chest to gently nudge him back into the hall. "Get the out of my room, Chilton," he said, and slammed the door. He heard Chilton let an outraged squawk as Will checked the doorknob. Predictably, there was no lock.

Will turned back around, and looked down at his dogs with a faint smile. "Well, what do you think?" he asked. They all sat down, staring up at him with barely restrained wagging tails. He sighed. "Yeah, figures. You lot always could be bought."

Will stepped around them to examine the room. It was more like an apartment than a bedroom. It was missing a kitchen, but it had everything else. A pair of Venetian doors opened into a large room with an elaborately dressed queen sized bed, and beside it there was a large bathroom with both a shower and a tub. He walked off in the other direction and found an expansive living space with bookshelves lined along the entire back wall. There were oversized cushioned sofas and a reading chair set beside a small table and lamp.

He stepped over to read the spines of the books, and sighed in disappointment. They were all books that had obviously never managed to make a single censorship list, and as such hardly worth his time. He made his way back towards the bedroom, his dogs trailing happily along behind him, and started pulling open the closet and all the drawers. They were all filled with expensive clothing in his size, though he could only find one pair of shoes, and they looked like they were meant for a black tie event.

He went to the windows next, pulling aside the thick curtains and flinching when he saw the crowds still waiting outside. He didn't know what they expected him to do. The windows were set into their housing securely, and there was no way to open them that he could see. He was fairly sure they were made of bullet-proof glass, as well. His chances of breaking them were pretty non-existent, and even if he did, there was no fire escape to take down to the ground.

There was a huge flat screen hung up on the wall across from the bed. He'd turned it on, but back off the moment he'd seen his own photo staring back at him. He didn't want to know what they were saying about him.

He was just setting the remote back on the bedside table when he heard someone knocking at the doors. Will sighed and headed back to them, pulling them open irritably, prepared to give Chilton or his messenger-lackey a piece of his mind—and then he froze.

A young woman stood there waiting politely, smiling hesitantly, and twisting the fingers of one hand anxiously with the other. She was wearing a wool cardigan, with snow-flake printed leggings and those Australian boots everyone was so into wearing these days. She did not look at all like a member of the OPA.

Maybe because she was an *omega* herself.

Will wasn't exactly sure how he knew, because he didn't quite recognize her from the news, though he felt as though he should. There was something familiar about her, but this was something else. This was a skin-deep knowledge that she was like him. Where Hannibal and the other alphas he'd met had always felt like barely maintained floods, she was a steady quiet stream.

"Hello," she said, before awkwardly pushing out a hand, as though she wasn't quite certain if that was how it was supposed to be done. "I'm Abigail Hobbs."

He shook her hand, still recovering from his surprise. "Hi," he said. "Will Graham."

She rolled her eyes, and he realized then how young she was. She couldn't have been more than nineteen. "That, I know," she said. "You're pretty much all anyone talks about at the moment, you know. Luckily, they stopped talking about me a long time ago."

The dogs were all trying to push through his legs to see who he was hiding, and growing increasingly irritated the longer Will fought to hold them back. He saw Abigail catch sight of them, her eyes lighting up, and stepped back with a slightly weary sigh. "Would you like to come in?" he asked. "I can't promise they'll behave, but my dogs would like to meet you as well."

Abigail slipped past him excitedly. "Oh, they're adorable," she said. "I have a cat, but I don't think he likes me that much. Still, Fred said I couldn't have another pet. And you—you have…*seven*!"

There was a vivid pink scar settled right near the curve of her neck. He wasn't sure how far back it stretched beneath her shirt, but it was jagged and angry, indented more at certain points along its line where he imagined the sharper teeth had pressed a little further in.

"You can ask," Abigail said, without looking at him. She was petting Winston, and giggling as the other dogs kept trying to push themselves up under her arms into her lap, but she was serious as she glanced back at him. "I don't mind. It's kind of nice to think everyone doesn't already know."

"What happened?" he asked.

"I went into heat and my dad got confused," she said. "Alphas aren't supposed to be attracted to their familial line, but they think he wasn't right in the head." She patted each dog one last time before rising back to her feet. "So my mother shot him," she said. "And then she shot herself."

The story came to him then. He remembered it being on the news a few years back. In deference to her trauma, Abigail Hobbs had been sheltered more than most newly presented omegas, and rushed off somewhere to be helped. He would venture to guess she hadn't left here since.

"Until you got here I was Fred's star pupil," she continued. "But I have a feeling you'll be the new favorite, which is your bad luck, I'm sorry to say."

"You really call him Fred?" Will asked.

"Sure do," Abigail said, grinning up him sweetly, though there was mischief behind it hidden so well he wondered if he was the first to see it. "He hates it."

Abigail had obviously not been fooled by Frederick Chilton's haughty airs. It made him wonder why she was still here, and the only conclusion he could reach was that it was likely the same as his own. "You aren't able to leave?"

"Where would I go?" she shrugged, wandering off to examine his room. She ran her eyes over the curtained windows, but didn't bother to pull them back to look out. She probably had their view memorized. "If I hadn't been an omega, I'd probably be worse off, in a mental hospital somewhere, or something. At least here I'm comfortable." She looked back at him. "You're a ward, too, aren't you?"

"Yes," Will said, though it ate at him to admit it. He would prefer to call himself a prisoner, at least it would be honest—but Abigail wasn't the one that deserved his anger.

"I thought so," she said. "I'd guess they're not real happy with you. Wouldn't want the rest of us getting any *ideas*."

Abigail might have been young, but she was insightful. She could see through Chilton's games and understood her own reality with a level of practicality that was either refreshing or disheartening, he couldn't quite decide. She was so young to be so jaded, but then she didn't have much reason to be anything else.

"I just came to say hello, really," Abigail explained, starting awkwardly back to his door. "I was pestering him so much that Fred gave me access to come to your floor any time I'd like, but I don't want to bother you."

"You can always drop by, I would be glad of the company," Will said honestly, "I'm sure the dogs would love to see you again, too."

Abigail smiled. "Alright," she said. "I'll see you soon then, okay?"

She looked more upbeat as she left, flouncing a little to the door before slipping back out and pulling it shut behind her. He tried to imagine living here for four years, under *Chilton's* dubious care, and he couldn't quite manage it.

He wondered if the anonymity at least was a comfort to her at all. She did not have reporters following her around, cataloguing her every move, the way some of the more high profile omegas did. He doubted he would be awarded the luxury of anonymity himself any time soon.

People had forgotten about Abigail Hobbs because her life was a tragedy no one wanted to remember—Will was a scandal, and there was nothing people loved more.

* * * * * *

There was blood slipping in from under the door.

Hannibal's expensive office rugs were slowly being destroyed as it built up, spreading out like a giant Rorschach. Will did not know where Hannibal was, or how he came to be in his office without him. He started for the ladder as the blood began to flood the first floor, rising higher as he raced to reach the second story landing.

The blood looked almost black in the moonlight coming in from the high windows, strangely beautiful and still, even as it threatened to consume him.

He backed up towards the corner, and hands wrapped around him from behind; sharp fingernails that felt like talons pricked into his wrists and forearms, before tugging to twirl him around and knock him to the floor.

Will looked up and Trevor stood above him, his wings lifting out from his sides to cast shadows over his face. "We're the same, you and I," Trevor told him, and then fell on top of him, forcing his teeth around the base of his neck to tear at the skin and leave an indelible, claiming mark.

Will screamed as he felt the teeth go in, but stopped struggling, realizing there was no point.

Trevor pulled back after it was done, except it wasn't Trevor any longer. Hannibal looked back at him instead, the blood coating his lips dripping down his chin as he curved them upwards into a smile.

"Do you see? You're just exactly like me," Hannibal told him.

Will jerked himself from the nightmare, violently pulling awake and thrashing to get free from his covers, only to find the pressure holding him down was very real. He cried out as he tried to pull away, but there were hands everywhere on him, holding down his arms and his legs. A pair of dark brown eyes watched his struggles gleefully from somewhere above him.

"Calm down now, sweetheart," the eyes said, the calm and steady voice not matching the emotions Will knew him to be feeling.

With a burst of adrenaline, Will managed to pull one of his legs free, before kneeing the man on top of him with all the strength he had. The man let out a strangled cry before tipping off him, and Will threw himself off the bed on the other side—and right into the arms of another guard.

He was grabbed and spun, but managed to jerk his elbow back hard enough to give him a second's freedom. Then the hands were back, and his arms were pinned to his sides as struggled, but he was calming down as reality was starting to make itself known. He could see now that the man he had kneed was Matthew Brown, his medical attendant. The one behind him was one of the guards from the limo.

Chilton was watching from the safety of the doorway to his room, leaning against the doorjamb with his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes were assessing as they watched Will, like he was planning his next move in a game of chess.

"If he can't be civil," Chilton said, "sedate him."

Will snarled in response, feeling like an animal caught in a trap. "You son of a—"

There was a sharp prick in his neck and then—

* * * * * *

"Do you want to talk about last night?"

Will pressed his eyes closed, focusing on his breathing. He was wearing a soft cotton robe like it an inadequate suit of armor, curled up on the couch while Chilton said across from him in the wingback chair that had been set in front of a desk.

Will had awakened the second time almost more disoriented than the first, feeling unsteady and as though his mouth was filled with cotton. Thankfully he had at least been left alone, though they'd hooked his finger up to a machine to monitor him. He'd pulled it off and the guards had brought him breakfast as though nothing had happened at all.

But one of them had the beginnings of a black eye, and Matthew still seemed to walk with a slight limp. Will was vindictively pleased about it.

He just wished Chilton had made the casualty list, too.

Instead the man had shown up in one of his overly impressive and not necessarily fashionable three-piece suits, and insisted on beginning their therapy sessions.

"No," Will finally answered, forcing his eyes back up. As expected, he was ignored.

"You were having a nightmare," Chilton continued as though he'd answered yes instead. "You could have hurt yourself." He paused for a moment. "You *did* hurt two of your guards."

Will's eyes slipped toward Matthew, who was leaning back against the wall behind Chilton. Far from seeming angry, the man looked pleased and amused—like someone that had been pleasantly surprised.

"I was being attacked," Will said. "I won't apologize for defending myself."

"There was no attack," Chilton said. "That was just in your mind."

Will casually held up his bare wrist, displaying the bruises that ringed around it. "I didn't dream this up, Fred," he said.

Chilton's lips tightened at the borrowed nickname, but he didn't comment on it. "We were attempting to keep you from thrashing straight off the bed. You appeared to be trying to sleepwalk. I realize it was disorienting to wake to that, but I can assure you our intentions were only to help. I was told of your nightmares, Will, that is why we were monitoring your sleep."

Alana, he figured. She probably thought she was doing her job as a doctor—he wondered if she even realized that it was a betrayal.

"Monitoring my sleep how?" he asked tightly.

"You were screaming," Chilton said, patiently. "The guards stationed outside your doors heard it. We only came to help."

Will watched his response, and realized it was a lie. Chilton had obviously bugged his bedroom, and who knew where else. Chances were there was nowhere he could go on this floor that he did not have wired for video or sound.

"If you don't want to talk about your nightmare, then I'd like to talk about your misdiagnosis, this empathy disorder," Chilton started.

"It wasn't a misdiagnosis," Will said.

"That diagnosis was made under the belief that you were a beta male," Chilton said, his tone that of someone explaining something simple to a small child, "but it is entirely impossible for an *omega* to have an empathy disorder. You're *supposed* to have empathy."

"Yes," Will drawled, "and mine is *disordered*."

Chilton sighed, uncrossing his legs to lean forward, his elbows braced casually on his knees, like they were just two old friends. "I want to help you, Will," he said, "but the first step you need to take is to accept what you are."

"I've always known what I am," he answered. "I was never hiding from myself. I was hiding from everyone else."

"Can you tell me why?" Chilton asked.

"You *are* the reason why," Will said, dropping his head back to lean back against the couch. He stared up at the ceiling. It was high and painted a pale royal blue, with a gold leaf pattern winding across it from all sides to meet in the middle. It was beautiful: such a beautiful cage.

He would rather be looking at his rain stained ceilings back at Wolf Trap, surrounded by his own books and fishing lures. It wasn't something he could explain, especially to Chilton, as most people valued things differently than Will did himself. They wanted nice things. He just wanted something that was *his*.

"What would you be doing if you hadn't been discovered?" Chilton asked, which was uncharacteristically insightful. Will still bristled at the question, at having his last recourse, his fantasies, invaded by the same force that had taken everything else.

"I imagine I would be home, reading a book," Will said, before pulling his knees up to his chest. He didn't like the way it made him seem vulnerable, but he was still shaky from whatever sedative they had shot him up with, and he felt he needed to hold himself together.

"And what's wrong with being here, reading a book?" Chilton asked.

"The books you have here only go up to a twelfth grade reading level," he snapped irritably.

There was also the fact that he couldn't just step outside, and take a walk through the thick trees that surrounded his house, letting the snow soak into his shoes. It was as if his entire world had been snatched out from under him, and no one could understand why he wasn't grateful it was gone.

"Violence isn't good for your therapy, Will," he said. "And I would say you've been exposed to enough of it already, wouldn't you?"

Will thought of all those psychotic minds he had been asked to traverse, and the footprints those same killers had left behind in his own disturbed mind. He wasn't unaware of what it had done to him, but that had been his choice, his curse. Even as his own dreams became blood-drenched nightmares that he couldn't seem to pull himself from, they were still his. No one had any right to take them from him, any more than they had to take his home.

"I think that was my choice," he said.

"Let's talk about your choices," Chilton said. "You hid for so long, do you even understand the risks you faced? That world you miss, it isn't safe for you any longer, it never really was." He frowned, all false concern, and Will wondered if he was supposed to believe it, if Chilton really thought he'd be that naïve. "Alphas would come after you now, they would want to claim you and hurt you. Alphas like Trevor Morton."

"You know what happened when Trevor Morton came after me?" Will asked, his voice given a little extra drawl due to the remnants of sedative in his system. His lips twitched into a smile as he glanced back at Chilton, and for once looked him straight in the eye. "I shot him."

Chilton's friendly psychiatrist façade slipped a bit, leaving him looking disquieted as he sat up straighter and unconsciously leaned just a little bit away from Will. "I can see you're not going to cooperate today," he finally said. "We'll try again tomorrow."

Chilton stood and adjusted his suit jacket, trying to salvage control of the session and failing miserably. Will had him figured out from the start; but Chilton was only finally starting to realize it.

"Oh," Chilton added, looking down at Will with some of his composure back, "we had to postpone your check up again. But the doctors at the hospital already cleared you, so we should be fine to wait until later in the week. Mr. Brown is just going to do a quick check of your vitals, make sure you aren't suffering any side effects from the sedative or your Alphamiticin exposure."

The doctor turned abruptly and pushed towards the doors. "Mr. Brown, please see to it," he said crisply, and exited without so much as looking back at Will.

Will glanced nervously back at Matthew, but the other man seemed perfectly professional. Will could not exactly explain the feeling that he inspired in him, he just knew he was *wrong*.

"Off with the robe then," Matthew said, pulling out a blood pressure cuff. "Need to check your vitals."

Will reluctantly pushed it off his shoulders, leaving him in nothing but a pair of soft flannel pants and a dark grey t-shirt. They had been the least obnoxious of the sleepwear that had been left for him, but they still left him feeling vulnerable.

Matthew kneeled in front of him, gently pulling his arm out to strap on the cuff before folding it back against Will's chest to begin. He went about the checks with obvious professionalism, but there was something in his eyes, like a little speck of glass caught in the

iris that didn't belong with all the rest. Will trusted himself enough to know he wasn't imagining it.

"I know you enjoyed it," he said quietly, mindful that Chilton may be listening in. Matthew went very still, before rolling his eyes up to meet Will's. "Holding me down."

"Yeah?" Matthew responded. "Did you?"

Will was about to respond, when Matthew gently laid his hand over his mouth. "Shh," Matthew warned, then pulled him up from the couch and dragged him to the large master bathroom. He pushed Will up against the wall beside the shower, and tugged the knob to turn the water on full.

"He's got the whole place wired, which I'm sure you've figured out," Matthew said, smirking slightly, "but not in here. No one can hear us in here."

Will wondered if he'd started a game he couldn't win. He'd had his suspicions about Matthew from the start, and now they were all but confirmed. Being beyond the reach of his other guards, alone with him, was not necessarily the smartest move he had ever made.

He could play it off, and feign ignorance to slip away. Or he could send off his opening salvo, and see if it gained him an ally or an enemy.

"You're an alpha," Will told him candidly. He couldn't *feel* it, Matthew was obviously on a strict regime of suppressants—but he knew it. Something in his eyes, so like Trevor, alphas that had so much power they had to find unconventional ways to let it out.

Matthew grabbed his chin, forcing him to look him in the eyes, and Will finally saw him unfiltered. There was something of the sadist to him, but Matthew did not necessarily like causing pain simply for the sake of causing pain. He wanted to be the best, to be recognized: but not by the public, he wasn't looking to be a spectacle.

He wanted a *partner*.

"Takes a player to recognize a player, huh?" Matthew asked him.

"It's smart," Will said. "Almost unlimited, unsupervised access to omegas. You're better at hiding than I ever was."

"I'd say I did just about as well," he replied. "It worked until it didn't. You planning to turn me in, omega?"

"That depends," Will said, keeping his voice casual. "Have you ever hurt Abigail?"

"I've never hurt any omega, and I never would. That holds no interest for me," Matthew promised. "Not even sure I'd try to stop you, if you turned me in. Well, I might have to tie you up a bit to give myself a head start, but then you already know I enjoyed holding you down."

"And what if I didn't turn you in?" Will asked. "You would owe me. Do you pay your debts, Matthew?"

"Always," Matthew promised.

"Then consider yourself in mine," Will said. "And get your hands off me."

Matthew smirked, stepping back with his hands held up in a parody of surrender. "You're just full of surprises," he said. "Does that mean you're going to keep my secret?"

"I will," he agreed. "You have my promise, no one will find out what you are from me."

"I'll hold you to that, omega," he said, grinning devilishly.

"My name is Will," he said, and Matthew's grin just grew.

"Be seeing you, *Will*," he said, before disappearing out the door.

Will let out a gasping breath, before pushing forward to turn off the water, leaving him half soaked. He leaned his forehead against the cool tile and took a deep, steadying breath.

He wondered how much he might be able to demand of Matthew before their alliance broke with the strain, and what he might be made to pay in return.

* * * * * *

Will wasn't surprised when Matthew knocked on his door to tell him he had a visitor, and Alana entered the room. He was surprised when Jack Crawford followed her in.

As an FBI agent and a happily married man, Jack would be almost pre-approved for visitation, despite his alpha status—but Will hadn't actually expected him to *come*. Matthew shut the door behind them, leaving the three of them alone, and Will realized that Alana was playing the role of 'chaperone' today.

"Will, how are you?" Alana asked, even as she got down on her knees to greet his canine hoard. They all jumped up on her excitedly, and it reminded Will of easier times.

"I'm just wonderful, Alana," he said dryly. "How are you?"

Jack ignored them, stepping forward to the small desk against the entryway wall. He pulled a thin grey tube from his pocket, twisted it, and set it down. "This will cut out any recording devices," Jack said simply. "But I'd guess we've only got a few minutes of privacy before Chilton sends someone to investigate."

Will watched him, nonplussed. "I see you're familiar with Dr. Chilton."

"Jack, you promised not to tell him," Alana hissed, as she rose to her feet.

"I lied," Jack said unrepentantly, before turning back to face Will. "I don't care if you're an alpha, beta, omega, or a god damned Martian. You're the best there is. I can't put you on the

payroll, but I need you on this."

Jack reached into his trench coat, and pulled out a manila folder. He held it out, but Will did not reach to take it from him.

"You want me to do a profile for you? *Now*?" he asked disbelievingly. "Are you kidding me, Jack?"

"It's the Chesapeake Ripper," Jack said simply. "He's back."

Will frowned, and fell victim to his own curiosity, stepping forward to take the folder and move to the desk.

"I would just like to go on the record as being against this," Alana said, turning a glare on Jack. "This isn't good for him, and Dr. Lecter has already agreed to assist on the case."

Will ignored her as he began to flip through the photos. At first, he wasn't sure what he was looking at, but slowly it began to take shape. The first shot was a far off Peach tree in bloom, with something glinting from its branches, and as the shots grew closer, he could see it was a gilded birdcage. It was secured from one of the higher branches and suspended at least four feet off the ground. The delicate white and pink blossoms fell all around it, gathering prettily on the floor of the cage.

The cage was occupied, of course: a dead man was displayed inside it. He was naked, and his hands had been bound together and hung from the top of the cage, the rest of his body positioned to sit on its knees. A closer view showed that the man had been vivisected, and then sewn back together with a thick, red cord by a deliberately uneven cross-stitch.

And so had his lips.

"What was missing?" Will asked.

"His heart," Jack said.

"This is different than his usual work," Will said. "It's not as…impersonal. This meant something, it had meaning." He frowned, glancing at a close up of the man's lips. The stitches were intentionally messy, crossing over each other in a garish manner that was not all the Ripper's usual M.O. He'd seen his stitch work—it was flawless. "Something's happened to him, something he didn't expect and isn't sure how much he wants. He might not stop at three this time."

"What makes you say that?" Jack asked worriedly.

"This isn't the start of a sounder…this is…*a message*." His forehead crinkled in confusion as he looked back at the first photo, the birdcage set up high in the tree, looking innocuous from so far away.

"A message?" Jack prompted.

"A love letter," Will corrected thoughtlessly, realizing the truth of it as soon as the words passed his lips.

"Shit," Jack snapped, and Will looked up to find Alana had gone pale. "I was afraid you would say that."

"What am I missing?" he asked.

"Alana told us what you said about Morton and the Alphamiticin, so we did some checking," Jack said. "Guess who reported three canisters missing the day before we searched Morton's house?"

Will looked back at the photo of the victim. "Wait, what was his name?"

"Tom Olsson," Jack told him.

"He's the doctor that was supposed to do my intake exam," Will said, feeling the pieces begin to slot together. "He's stationed here."

"Yes," Jack said grimly. "Please tell me that's a coincidence, Will. Tell me that this 'love letter' is not for you."

"I—" Will started, but of course he couldn't. They both already knew he was at the center of everything—the Alphamiticin that exposed him, one of the OPAs most prominent doctors killed and displayed. There was no way this *wasn't* for him.

"God damn it," Jack snarled. "The OPA is going to triple your security. They'll never let you help."

"Or we could not tell them," Will said quickly, glancing up.

"That's not an option," Alana said firmly.

"Will, we don't have much time. I need to know what you make of this. You think the Chesapeake Ripper planted the Alphamiticin in Morton's house?" Jack demanded.

"I certainly don't think they were working together," Will said.

"How could he have known about you?" Alana asked, frowning as she crossed her arms, reluctantly drawn in to the puzzle.

"Maybe he didn't," Will said, even though it seemed unlikely, it was the better option to believe. "He could have just been covering his tracks, misdirection for evidence that would have traced back to Olsson, and then to him. He'll be someone involved with law enforcement, or somehow tangentially involved in the case. He would have had inside information."

The door opened a crack, and Matthew leaned in. "Everything okay in here?" he asked.

Will narrowed his eyes. "You don't enter this room without knocking, do you understand?" he snapped, stepping forward to push it shut. Matthew quickly retreated, getting out of the way before the door slammed into him.

Jack watched him, looking impressed. "Already running the place, huh?"

Will just went back to the photos. "I need to see the crime scene," he said.

"Do you know how many strings I had to pull just to get you *pictures*?" Jack asked incredulously.

"He pulled mine," Alana interrupted bitterly. "And I can promise that won't happen again."

"Look, Will, I don't like it either," Jack said. "But you're gonna have to sit this one out. I promise, we're going to get this guy."

Will nodded tiredly, shuffling the photos back into the folder when his eye caught on a close up of the cage. "The cage," he whispered.

"What?" Jack asked.

"He might have finally made a mistake," Will told him, looking up. "That cage is going to be dipped in real gold, I'd stake my life on it. He wouldn't go to all this effort, then allow the centerpiece to be a fake. It can't be easy to come by fourteen karat birdcages."

"You think he custom ordered it?" Jack asked.

"I don't think he had enough time to make it on his own," Will said. "So unless he already had a gold birdcage sitting around…"

"Right. I'll look into it," he said, taking the folder back from Will before starting to the door. He stopped a few steps away, and turned back. "Take care of yourself, Will."

Jack had always pushed him past his limits, and used him like some kind of profiler savant—but he was also maybe the only person he knew more concerned with what he could *do* than what he *was*, and it was absurdly comforting.

"You too," Will called after him.

Left alone with Alana, Will avoided looking her way, but knew it wouldn't help. Alana, whatever else she was, whatever their disagreements, was at the undisputed top in her field.

There was no way she missed the unsteadiness he'd been trying to hide. It was too much to hope she had, as she stepped closer and gently rolled up one of his sleeves to reveal the ringed bruises.

"How did this happen, Will?" she asked gently.

"It doesn't matter," he said.

"I disagree," she said. "If someone is hurting you, I need to know right now."

"That's a lovely sentiment, Alana," he said. "But they were well within their rights to restrain me. Or have you forgotten what I am?"

She flinched back from him, looking conflicted. Omegas were both cherished and hoarded: causing harm to an omega was one of the most harshly punished crimes anyone could commit, but doing whatever was necessary to *protect* an omega from getting hurt was considered par for the course.

"Will, I—" she started, before breaking off with a sigh and switching tracks. "I hope you understand that I need to tell Chilton about the threat the Ripper poses."

"I'd like you to leave," he told her, as politely as he could. "Please."

She hesitated for a moment, almost as if she were going to tell him to call if he needed anything—but of course he couldn't call anyone, so finally she left.

Will closed the door behind her, wishing he could have the satisfaction of turning a lock.

* * * * * *

"You have three minutes," Chilton snapped, looking disgruntled.

Chilton had come to his room and then unceremoniously escorted him to the elevator, before bringing him to an office on another floor. A phone had sat waiting on the desk, the handset upturned on the surface a foot from the base.

Will frowned as Chilton left the room without saying anything else, and carefully picked up the phone. "Hello?" he said.

"Will."

Hannibal's voice filtered through the phone line like a caress, and Will stumbled until he was leaning up against the desk. "Hannibal."

"I wanted to call and see how you were doing," he said. "I hope I haven't caught you at a bad time."

"Yeah? How'd you pull that off?" he asked, glancing up at the diplomas to realize they were all issued to Dr. Frederick Chilton. This was his office. "This is the first time they've even let me near a phone. You and Chilton buddies?"

"Frederick and I are old colleagues," Hannibal corrected calmly. "I'd hardly call the man a friend."

"I'm pretty sure this room is bugged," Will warned him. "Everywhere else is."

"I'd be shocked if it wasn't," Hannibal replied amiably.

"You never answered my question," Will said.

"I may have made a substantial donation," Hannibal said nonchalantly. "They were not unappreciative of the gesture."

"What do you want from me?" Will asked, and they both knew he wasn't just referring to the phone call.

"The last time I saw you, you were quite unwell," Hannibal said. "They did not allow me to visit you at the hospital. I wanted to make sure you were settling in."

Something about his tone of voice triggered a memory, and Will closed his eyes as he remembered Hannibal carrying him out. "I'm surprised you're so concerned," he said. "I recall you smiling."

Hannibal was quiet for a moment, and then he sighed. "I readily admit that I was not unaffected by your charms," he said. "Considering how far you were in heat, I think I comported myself as a gentlemen."

"Hannibal, I don't know what you want from me," he said. "Whatever was going on with us, we barely know each other…and it wasn't…it was biology, it wasn't real."

"Then you do realize we are compatible?" Hannibal asked.

"I'm an omega," Will said. "I'm compatible with most all alphas. I was compatible with Trevor Morton, too."

"This is different," Hannibal said. "And you know it."

"You weren't surprised," Will said. "I remember your voice when I got sick. How long had you known what I was?"

"I had no idea, Will," Hannibal said. "I realize I'm a convenient target, but it's not my fault you're there."

"Who should I blame? Trevor Morton? The Chesapeake Ripper?" he snapped.

"I noticed you did not list yourself," he said. "These restrictions you hate so much are a direct result of your own deception. Most omegas are not treated like prisoners, and it doesn't have to be this way."

Will laughed, running a hand over his eyes. "Right," he said. "I should have been a good little omega from the start, right?"

"I'm not asking you to regret your choices, Will, merely that you take some responsibility for them," Hannibal corrected. "You had to have known this could happen, from the moment you made the decision to hide what you are."

"I knew this could happen the moment I knew what I *was*," Will snapped. "And I had no choice in that."

"What choices do you have left to you now?" Hannibal asked.

"You're not my psychiatrist," he said. "You never really were."

"I could have been," Hannibal reminded him. "I chose instead to be a friend."

Will knew Hannibal was not a friend—there was something in that smile, something that he couldn't remember quite well enough to read. Still, he could feel the way this was headed: a well-respected, wealthy alpha, using donations to get himself put to the top of the visitors list. A short courting period, a bonding, and then he'd be well and truly caught.

Will was disappointed that Hannibal thought it would be that easy. He thought he'd understood him more than that.

"We're not friends, Hannibal," he told him. "Don't call me again."

He hung up without waiting for a reply, just as Chilton appeared to tell him that his time was up.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Will takes a big risk in his quest to track the Ripper, and Hannibal furthers his plot to court him on two fronts.

boundless and bare

Chapter Notes

> Note: Well, we are at the half-way mark! Also, I have entirely given up on trying to keep the chapters short. They've got minds of their own.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Please," Will pleaded, "please, just make it stop."

He reached up to cover his eyes, but it didn't do him any good. His tormentor was ruthless, and only laughed at him before hitting him in the forehead with a piece of popcorn.

"Stop being so dramatic," Abigail snorted. "This is my favorite movie of all time!"

He opened one eye to glare at her, but she was already back to watching the movie she was set on forcing him to endure along with her. They were sitting shoulder to shoulder against the headboard of his bed, with the dogs squeezed in all around them. She'd brought a blu ray of some cinematic travesty far too early in the morning only to insist that he watch it. Will did not watch movies often, and he especially did not watch trite alpha/omega romances. This one in particular was an unholy alliance of a myriad of tropes.

He would not have agreed to watch it at all for anyone else, but Abigail was apparently a weakness. Will did not connect to people as a general rule, and certainly not easily, if ever. To have such an instant connection was often times purely biological and as a consequence disconcerting, as it had been with both Hannibal and Trevor Morton. But Abigail—Abigail was a comfort.

He did not know how much of the cause might be his lack of suppressants, which had left him emotionally raw and adrift. They had finally found a replacement for Dr. Olsson and given him a thorough and thoroughly embarrassing exam, only to decide that his body needed to get back on a normal cycle before a new prescription of suppressants could be introduced.

Which meant he'd spent the last week going through suppressant withdrawal, entirely cold turkey.

The only good part of it was that Chilton had cut almost all of their sessions short, apparently finding that he was a bit too difficult at the moment to deal with. Will thought it amusing that Chilton seemed to think that it was entirely a consequence of the withdrawal, and not his own dislike and complete lack of respect for the man. He was in for a surprise if he expected to find Will more cooperative any time soon.

"I think it's romantic," Abigail insisted, as she tossed a few more pieces of popcorn to the dogs surrounding them. They were quickly learning that Abigail was a soft touch, and he wasn't entirely sure she'd even had a chance to eat any of it herself.

"It's degrading," he countered.

She side-eyed him. "It's inspirational," she insisted. "It's a story of true love. He defied everyone to choose a commoner over all those alpha princes!"

"And the commoner became the king, instead of the omega who had spent his whole life learning how to rule," he pointed out, reaching over to steal some of the popcorn before it all went to the dogs.

Abigail frowned slightly, leaning her head back with a sigh. "I guess I never thought about it that way."

The romantic interests on screen had their last dramatic reunion, and the credits finally made their welcome appearance. Will gratefully lunged for the remote, before switching the television off. Abigail watched him with disapproval.

"Don't you ever want an alpha?" she asked.

"Not particularly," Will shrugged. "Anyway, what does it matter now? I'm damaged goods."

"Are you kidding?" Abigail asked, pushing herself up on her knees. "You're gorgeous! And the fact that you're older is actually a plus for most. You're worldly."

"Worldly?" he echoed in disbelief. His idea of a vacation was a three-hour flight to look at a dead body. He'd hardly consider himself cultured.

"I've been reading about you online," Abigail explained. "Everyone's fascinated with you. I heard one of my guards talking about how Fred had to increase lobby security because of all the alphas coming to meet you. You're probably going to get *tons* of offers at your Unveiling."

"Please don't bring that up," Will frowned. "Isn't there any way out of that?"

"Sure," Abigail said sadly, shrugging half-heartedly. "I got out of mine—but I actually *am* damaged goods. No one wants an omega that's already marked."

Will turned to her in concern. He was never much good at making people feel better, but he could feel the buried distress that was running through Abigail, threatening to pull her down like an undertow. "I'm sure that's not true," he told her.

"Well, okay, sure, just cause there's so few of us," she admitted. "But I don't want to be someone's consolation prize. I want what they have." She motioned to the cover of the blu ray she'd brought, with the prince and his forbidden alpha caught in an epically tragic embrace.

"Looks exhausting," Will said, scrunching up his nose at the thought.

Abigail laughed. "Yeah, I guess it would be," she admitted. "What's that saying? *Love is like war: easy to begin but very hard to stop.*"

"Who said that?" Will asked.

"Mencken," Abigail said wryly. "If nothing else, my time here has left me well read."

"Well, love is a battlefield," Will deadpanned.

"Who said that?" she asked curiously.

"Pat Benatar," he told her sagely.

* * * * * *

Over the last week, Will had gotten used to Abigail's presence. It seemed to leave his floor eerily quiet in contrast whenever she returned to her own. It didn't help that his dogs had taken to abandoning him to follow her home. Though Will would never play favorites, he would admit, if only to himself, that he was glad Winston always choose to stay with him.

The rest of the traitors would barrel right into the elevator after Abigail, and leave with her without a second glance. The first time they'd done it, they had tried to get them back out with limited success. Will suspected they could sense Abigail needed them, and he certainly couldn't begrudge it when they made her so happy. He'd pretty much made his peace with the fact that he was now sharing custody.

Though he did half suspect the manipulative little beasts of just trying to get access to Abigail's cat.

Winston, for his part, seemed content to stay on their own floor, but Will worried about them not getting to go outside. The OPA had set up an indoor lawn for Winston to use instead, one that was mysteriously cleaned each night. Will still felt he should allow the guards to take the pack out, but he didn't like the thought of them out of his influence, and he didn't trust the guards not to lose them.

His own attempts to be allowed to go with them had of course been ignored.

Even the ball that was looming in front of him would take place on one of the upper floors. He didn't think they intended to let him out of this fish bowl any time soon. Still, Will was not without his own devices.

He'd come back from his call with Hannibal the week before to notice that the audio jammer was still sitting innocently on his entryway desk. Jack was not the type to forget *anything*, which meant he'd intended to leave it behind. It was strangely comforting to have an ally, even if it was one he hadn't expected. If he'd been asked, a month ago, he would have bet Alana would be the most comfort to him if he was ever discovered.

Certainly he wouldn't have thought it would be Jack, who had always fit much better into the rule of friendly adversary.

Will had risked showing the device to Matthew, in order to use it to keep their conversations confidential. Matthew had been impressed, and had given him a surveillance rundown in return. There were video feeds on all the doors and the pool, but the rest of the rooms were audio only. Typically, no surveillance devices of any kind were allowed in the omega's private residence, but Chilton had bent the rules by claiming Will was unstable and might hurt himself.

It meant that when the audio would cut out now and again, Chilton didn't have much he could do about it. He couldn't acknowledge that he had bugged his rooms in the first place much less inquire why it wasn't working the way it should, because it was technically not allowed.

Having a layout of the surveillance gave Will at least an illusion of control, and Matthew was rapidly becoming an invaluable ally. Even so, Will never let his guard down around him. Matthew had an angle, and Will hadn't managed to figure it out completely yet. It made him cautious.

He was pretty much always on his guard, these days. So when Winston skittered ahead of him out of the greenhouse, growling lowly, he stepped out prepared for almost anything.

What he found was that Winston had backed a young redheaded beta woman against the wall beside the elevator.

He recognized her instantly: Freddie Lounds.

"You want to call off the dog, maybe?" she asked, smiling disarmingly, and holding out a hand to shake. "I'm Anna Mitchell, from the OPA's—"

"I know who you are," Will told her dryly, very obviously not calling Winston off. Freddie Lounds might have gotten her start at a third-rate news site, Tattle-Crime, but she had crawled her way out from underneath the rocks to earn her own news show on cable. There weren't many people that didn't know her, these days.

"Right," she said, dropping her offered hand and glancing at Winston suspiciously. "Well, in that case, you already know why I'm here."

"Yes, but *how* are you here?" he asked, reaching out to put a steadying hand on Winston's head. His dog looked up at him, obviously still wary of their guest. He dropped his other hand in his pocket, and discreetly turned on the surveillance jammer.

"I had an appointment with Abigail. Chilton thinks it's an hour, Abigail thought I was just dropping something off," she shrugged, but he could tell she was pleased with herself. She held up a thin plastic film with a print on it. "I borrowed Chilton's print to work the elevator. Child's play, really. He thought I was fawning all over him as I shook his hand, when really I was pressing his thumb into a mold."

"Very enterprising," Will told her.

"You don't seem surprised," she said, grinning slyly as she watched him.

"Very little surprises me," he said. Considering there was a dead man that lurked in his peripheral vision like a guest that wouldn't leave, a stray reporter was hardly worth a footnote.

"Your FBI picture doesn't do you justice," Freddie said, tilting her face up as she looked him over. "Or maybe being an omega just suits you."

Will narrowed his eyes. He didn't need to be reminded of the changes he had been going through. "What the hell do you want, Ms. Lounds?"

"I want to talk to the man that fooled the world," she said, watching him carefully. "I admit to being a bit curious about what makes you tick. What neurosis might be lurking in your disturbed mind that you'd rather be a beta than what you are."

"Maybe because as a beta I didn't have to deal with hack reporters showing up uninvited," he said.

"Well, you would have, if Jack Crawford hadn't managed to sideline me every time," she said. "Honestly, I think profiler Will Graham, beta, was far more interesting. A man who gets in the minds of killers." She leaned forward, and Winston started up a low, steady growl that had her backing off again. "But Will Graham, secret omega? Well, I've got to go easy on *you*, or the backlash would knock my show right off the air."

"Then why are you wasting your time?" he asked, gently tugging Winston back by his collar. "You're not exactly known for writing puff pieces."

"True, but I said I wanted to talk to you, I didn't say I wanted to talk *about* you. I want to ask you about something else," she explained. "But…oh, that's right. You've really got no idea about what's going on in the world, do you?

He tried not to let that irritate him, but it was often the truth that hurt the most. She could insult him however much she wanted and he wouldn't blink, but pointing out exactly how isolated he was? Well, that got under his skin.

And she knew it.

"I'm here about the Ripper's latest victim," she elaborated, stringing him along with a skill he hadn't really expected from her.

"I know all about Dr. Olsson," Will told her, trying not to sound defensive.

"Do you?" she asked, grinning sweetly. "Well, he was certainly a big story last week. But he's old news now, sweetheart."

She pulled out her phone and deftly gave it a few taps, before holding it out to face him. It was displaying an article from her site, its headline bolded across the top half of the screen: **The Chesapeake Ripper takes out Will Graham's next suitor: Coincidence or Courting Gift?**

He frowned and snatched the phone out of her hands. Freddie made an outraged protest and stepped towards him, but stopped herself in plenty of time.

She was going to be in enough trouble for trespassing in an unauthorized area of the Omega Care Center, if she left even the slightest mark on him, she'd be going away for years. She was too smart to touch him.

He scrolled down to view the featured story. It was written with her typical flair:

> **Tobias Budge, owner of the Chordophone String Shop, was found slaughtered at the Metropolitan Opera early Sunday morning by the cleaning staff. The FBI's BAU director, Jack Crawford, refused to comment on the details of the case, but this is the second murder attributed to the Chesapeake Ripper in as many weeks that can be traced back in some way to Will Graham. Dr. Tom Olsson, killed the prior week, was the on site doctor at the facility that was granted custody of previously unregistered omega. Tobias Budge, while no connection has been confirmed, was one of the OPA's most gracious donors and had been making overtures to get himself to the head of the list for the upcoming Unveiling Ball being held in Graham's honor.**
>
> **Despite the lack of comment from authorities, the body, found with a dozen red roses spilling from its lips, seems to speak for itself—**

Will stopped reading Freddie's speculations, turning his attention to the photo instead. He had no idea how she'd managed to get so close. Tobias was laid out on the stage, wearing a tuxedo. His hands were palms up, out at his sides, and his eyes wide open. Just as described, a dozen long-stemmed red roses protruded from his lips like he was some kind of grisly vase, set with care to look as perfectly arranged as anything that could be found in a florist's shop.

"I don't even know this man," Will said, glancing back up at Freddie. "What does this have to do with me?"

"I try to keep rumors out of my articles—" Freddie began, ignoring Will's snort of derision, "—but everyone knew Tobias Budge had his heart set on you. He was planning to make you an offer you couldn't refuse."

"There's no offer he could have made I wouldn't have refused," Will promised, before pocketing Freddie's phone. "I'm keeping this, by the way. You leave it activated, and you can text me a question a day. I even promise not to make any long distance calls."

Freddie's eyes lit up at the offer. "Are you serious?"

"Yes," he said honestly. Giving her a few answers was a small price to pay to gain some access back to the outside world. He didn't care what she wrote about him, anyway. "You can even quote me. I don't care."

Freddie reached into her purse and pulled out a charger. "You're going to need this, then," she said, holding it out for him. "If you don't answer me, I'm remotely deactivating it."

"I would expect nothing less," he agreed, grabbing the charger and shoving it into his other pocket. As it turned out, he managed to get it out of sight just in time. Just a moment later, four of his bodyguards finally came storming out of the elevator.

"Fellas, I think I may have gotten off on the wrong floor," Freddie said, smiling disarmingly, as she spun to face them. She held her hands up, but it was obvious they were used to dealing with her. They didn't buy the innocent act.

"Chilton's gonna blacklist you after this, Lounds," one of them snapped.

One of the other guards stayed with Will, giving him a once-over before checking on Winston, too. "She hurt you?" he asked gruffly.

"No," Will said. "She was remarkably helpful, actually. She really did seem confused to find me here. She was looking for Abigail."

The man snorted, watching him with sympathy, obviously believing the poor, gullible omega had fallen prey to one of Freddie's games. Will let him think it, and as the other guards manhandled Freddie back to the elevator, he took note of the lax security—obviously the OPA prescribed to quantity over quality.

It took them six minutes to realize she was even here.

* * * * * *

"I heard you had some excitement today," Matthew said.

Will calmly activated the audio jammer, in what had become a strange little ritual of theirs before Matthew took his vitals. He waited until the jammer was humming in his hand to respond. "Freddie Lounds definitely isn't boring," he said. "But that's really the nicest thing I can say about her."

"Hmm," Matthew said, as he secured the blood pressure cuff on his arm. He leaned down to run his nose up along the length of his forearm. "You're smelling better and better every day."

Will jerked his hand away, holding it up to his chest so Matthew could start. "We're never going to happen," he said firmly. He knew it would have probably have been better to lead Matthew on, but it would have been dangerous, too. There was a reason he wasn't supposed to be alone with an alpha; they couldn't always control themselves around an unmated omega, especially one being denied suppressants.

But Matthew was not a typical alpha.

He just smirked when Will turned him down, his alpha pride apparently impervious to damage. Will often wondered exactly what it was that Matthew *wanted*, because he certainly didn’t just want an omega as a status symbol—considering his deception, he'd be facing a death sentence if he ever bonded an omega publicly—and he didn't want a bed warmer like Trevor—he'd been working here for years, he'd had plenty opportunity.

Will had a feeling whatever Matthew wanted, it was emotional, not physical. He was fairly sure he was incapable of giving it to him, either way.

The pull he'd felt towards Hannibal—towards *Trevor*, even—was absent with Matthew. It might have been Matthew's excessive use of suppressants, but he was like a void. He'd carved the alpha instinct right out of himself and replaced it with a brilliant, efficient facsimile.

"I'd get you anything you want, you know that?" Matthew asked. "You only have to ask."

Matthew had made such offers before, but Will was hesitant to test his generosity. He did not know if Matthew would help him escape, but he was fairly certain he wouldn't let him go off on his own if he did. Instead he had only used Matthew as source of information, which was always an underrated currency.

Apart from learning all the surveillance points, Matthew had also confided that the registry bracelet he wore doubled as a tracking device. Even if he got out, they could find him any time they liked.

"What do you know about Tobias Budge?" he asked.

"The man? Or his murder?" Matthew asked shrewdly.

"Both," Will answered.

"He's pretty well known to the OPA," Matthew said. "He came sniffing around Abigail when she was first found. She's no fool, though. She asked Chilton to remove him from the visitor's list. Don't get me wrong, Chilton's an asshole, but he got it done. Had to fight against the whole OPA to do it, but he eventually convinced them she was too emotionally unstable and pushing her towards a bond would do more harm than good. He got all alphas barred from contact with her until she was ready." He tossed Will a large grin. "Well, 'cept for me."

Will narrowed his eyes at the thought of this alpha trying to lure a traumatized teenager into an irrevocable bond. The more he learned about Budge, the less he sympathized with his fate. "And what did he want with me?"

"Heard about that, huh?" Matthew asked. "You didn't have to worry. Would have killed him before he could touch you, if the Ripper hadn't beat me to it."

"But he was trying," Will insisted.

"Yeah," Matthew said. "He's got a long history as a donor. He already got a VIP invite for your Unveiling. Would have tried to get you to agree to grant him visitation, because even Chilton wouldn't be able to bar him then."

"How would he have gotten me to agree to that?" he asked.

"Well, for one, I doubt he had any idea how stubborn you are," Matthew said wryly, "and well, he told Abigail that if she didn't bond with him, he'd make everyone she loves suffer. Kid handled herself though, told him he was a little too late, they were already all dead. Chilton got it all on tape."

"How did he not get arrested for threatening her?" Will demanded.

"OPA had the tape destroyed, didn't want the scandal, and he hadn't actually threatened to hurt *her*, which is really all they care about," he shrugged. "They figured no harm done."

"And they were just going to offer me up to him?" Will asked.

"Well, let's be honest," Matthew said, "if tiny little Abigail Hobbs could handle him, you would probably would have had him crying within the first five minutes. I don't think you were ever in any danger of being his mate."

It was a valid point, but it still rankled. Not all omegas could handle themselves, because most had been raised to believe they didn't have to. "Do you think he was killed because of me?" Will asked.

"World owes you a favor, if he was," Matthew said. He finished getting Will's vitals and gently reached out to undo the cuff. "I wouldn't lose any sleep over it."

It wasn't really Tobias Budge that worried him, but the man behind the scenes. If Tobias was a suitor, what did that make the Ripper? Was Freddie right, and this was a courting gift? Was Olsson? The Alphamiticin?

Everything just kept coming back to him.

He needed to find out who the Ripper was. He had to stop him before this went any further, and the only way he knew to do that wasn't available to him.

"What's wrong?" Matthew asked, watching him in concern as he got to his feet.

"I'm worried they aren't going to find him without me," Will explained, leaning forward to rest his forehead on the palms of his hand. "I wish I could see the crime scene for myself."

"What would that do?" Matthew asked.

"That would show me what happened to Tobias," he explained. "And maybe I could figure out what he intended next."

His doors crashed open, and Chilton came storming in. Will discreetly shut off the jammer and stuck it back in his pocket. He'd already hidden the phone and charger—he didn't even trust Matthew to know about those—and they were safely tucked away within a pair of shoes in his closet.

"Give us the room, Mr. Brown," Chilton said crisply.

Matthew winked at him, then quickly left, pulling the door shut behind him. Will lifted his head to glance up at Chilton disinterestedly. "What can I do for you, Fred?"

"What did you say to her?" Chilton demanded.

"I thought you had cameras for that," Will said.

"They've been on the fritz," Chilton snapped, and Will held back a grin.

"She was looking for Abigail," Will said. "Maybe the elevator is on the fritz, too. It took her to the wrong floor."

Chilton narrowed his eyes. "Why are you covering for her? What did she offer you?"

Will leaned back against the couch, lifting one foot to rest it on the antique coffee table. Chilton's eye twitched. "I certainly don't have any reason to cover for her," he agreed. "Which is why you can be certain I'm telling the truth when I say this all seems to be a misunderstanding. I hope she isn't in much trouble."

"If she writes a single line of slander about me—" Chilton started, and Will couldn't restrain his smirk this time, as realized why the psychiatrist was so concerned. He thought Will was going to out him as incompetent to the world. Tempting as it was, he had loftier goals.

"Well, if it was *written*, that would make it Libel. But I wouldn't concern yourself. Freddie Lounds has no interest in writing about me, or you, for that matter," he said. "She writes true crime—well, to some degree of true. She's not much for omegas or the society pages in which we seem destined to reside."

Chilton calmed down momentarily, realizing the truth of his words—and missing entirely what he *wasn't saying*. "Right," he said. "That's right. Well, she won't be getting in here again, you can be sure of that. She's been banned for life from any OPA run facility."

"I feel safer already," Will said.

Chilton watched him for a moment longer, suspicious, but not astute enough to realize what he should be suspicious *of*. "You're going to have to start getting with the program soon, Will," he said.

"Oh, don't worry, Fred. I'm understanding my situation a bit more each day," Will assured him.

Chilton watched him for a moment longer, and then smirked. "Good to know," he said. "Then you'll be ready for your Unveiling in a couple days. I was going to request another postponement, but since you're doing so well…"

Will glared at him, one hand digging into the arm of the sofa. To ask for help from Chilton would be a concession he wasn't willing to make. He would have to face this sometime, and there was no use putting it off.

"Looking forward to it," he finally managed to say.

Chilton smiled back smugly, confident he'd won this one, but Will wasn't going to cede the battle until they managed to make it through the ball without any bloodshed.

* * * * * *

He was splayed out on his bed trying to sleep, Winston pressed up against him, when he heard footsteps. He jerked himself up, reaching for a weapon he was no longer allowed, and sucking in a deep breath.

Matthew stepped into the low light coming from the window, and Will saw that he was only carrying a sweater and a pair of shoes. He frowned. "Matthew, what—?"

"Get dressed." Matthew dropped the clothes on his lap. "We need to hurry."

Will started to reach for the shoes and then paused, gently pulling his hand back again. He sighed. "I'm not running away with you," he told Matthew. It wasn't as though the idea hadn't occurred to him, but he wasn't willing to trade his prison at the OPA for one with Matthew.

"Relax, this is just a field trip, not a proposal," Matthew promised with a wink. "You can always come back. But when do you think you're going to get another offer to leave?"

"Field trip to where?" he asked suspiciously.

Matthew looked far too pleased himself. "I'm taking you out to the opera."

Will froze as he realized what he meant. He looked up at Matthew in disbelief. "You've got to be kidding," he said. "It's not worth it. We'll both be caught."

"I've got the tape on loop with audio from another night. As of now, Chilton thinks you're sound asleep, and went home himself an hour ago. Anyway, I switched your tracker ID with Abigail's in the system. Kid never leaves her room, no one will track her. But if they track you…"

"They'll see me here," Will realized. It was brilliant in its simplicity, and could give him a hell of a head start if he wanted to take this opportunity to run.

"I know what you're thinking," Matthew said wryly, "but how far do you think you'll get without me?"

It was an annoying truth. Will had no resources and no allies he could call on other than Matthew himself. Alana, even Jack, would just bring him straight back here—well, Jack might let him finish his profile first. His accounts were being held in trust and far outside of his reach. Even if by some miracle he managed to make it back to Wolf Trap, it would be the first place they looked.

But it was crazy to leave just to look at a crime scene. It was risky, and ridiculous, and…the only chance he was ever likely to get.

"Right," Will decided, reaching down to pull on the tennis shoes. He pulled on the hoodie next, leaving the hood up. Winston pushed himself up as he dropped down from the bed, and he turned to stop him.

"Shh, Winston, stay here," he told him, clicking his tongue as he motioned for him to lie back down. Winston gave him a sort of long-suffering look that would have been more in place on

a frazzled mother, but did as he was told. Will was thankful the rest of the pack was upstairs with Abigail, because he doubted they would have allowed for as stealthy of an exit.

Matthew led Will by the hand to the elevator, and they took it all the way down to the basement floor. It opened into a parking garage Will hadn't seen when he first arrived. Matthew held him up against the side of the elevator, and whispered, "Wait—one, two, three —"

He grabbed Will by the front his hoodie and pulled him out of the elevator and off to one of the first rows of cars, before helpfully shoving him into the backseat. "Get down," he said. "We just barely missed the cameras."

Matthew got into the driver's seat and pulled away, driving them out of the parking garage and out onto a main road. Will let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding and sat up in the backseat, staring out at the city street with mixed apprehension and longing.

He'd never been very comfortable in cities—but really, any change of scenery was appreciated at the moment.

"How are we going to get in?" Will asked, glancing up at the rearview mirror to meet Matthew's reflected eyes.

"I know one of the night guards, he'll let us in," Matthew said. Then his eyes flickered away, back towards the road. "I know you're going to be tempted to bolt, but there's something you need to think about. Everyone knows your face, and without your suppressants—well, there's only two kinds of people in this world: those that would turn you right back in, and those that would keep you for themselves."

"I know what's at risk," Will said, leaning forward. "I also know what you're risking. Why are you doing this?"

"You wanted to," Matthew said simply. "And I want to watch you work."

Will frowned, his hands tapping anxiously against his dark blue sweatpants. He hadn't bothered to change out of the t-shirt and pants he'd been planning to sleep in, but the pajamas the OPA provided were nicer than most of the work clothes from his previous life. With the hoodie pulled up around his face, he imagined he'd mostly blend in.

The opera house was not that far away, though the traffic was unexpected for how late it was. Will supposed it was true that New York never slept. He had heard of the Metropolitan Opera, of course, but had never really had any great desire to visit it. Still, as Matthew parked and led them on foot the rest of the way to the Lincoln Center, it made a beautiful picture.

Matthew leaned up close to his ear from behind. "How's this for a first date?"

"Certainly unconventional," Will remarked. "Considering the circumstances."

"True," Matthew agreed wryly. "And we're going to have to make our own entertainment." He glanced back at Will, and pulled his hood a little further over his head. "Don't make eye

contact with anyone. Stay behind me."

A guard met them at the doors, and stepped aside to let them in. "We're even after this, Brown," he said irritably. "Show your little piece the stage and then get your asses back here, ten minutes. Not a second more. Got it? I could lose my fucking job over this, Jesus."

"Charming as always, Devon," Matthew answered. "I think we can handle that."

Matthew reached back to grab his hand again, and tugged him straight towards the theater. It was bigger than Will had imagined, and it was no small walk to get them to the stage. It loomed above them as they approached, and Matthew led them to the side where a set of stairs sat.

"You know, I heard Chilton talking on the phone about the case," Matthew said conversationally, "Did you know Budge was hollowed out? Like, the Ripper took *everything*. He was nothing but an empty rib cage and skin."

Will let Matthew's voice fade into the background as he stepped out onto the stage. There were no bloodstains left behind. Oftentimes, the Ripper left his crime scenes almost pristine. He liked things to be put where they belonged: blood splatters were beneath him.

So there was nothing here to look at. There wasn't even a single curtain out of place against the edge of the stage. The stained hardwood floors looked like they had recently been cleaned, and were sparkling beneath the half-lit overhead lights.

He hated arriving to crime scenes this late, but there was still something. Some phantom feeling, like the room was still just a bit haunted by what had been done here. He reached for that feeling and grasped it, pulling it inside him and closing his eyes.

This was no ordinary victim, though the grandness of the stage was indicative of the Ripper's usual style. This was not a typical offense, some simple misstep in front of the absolute worst person to misstep against. This was a *trespass*.

Tobias Budge had thought to take what was the Ripper's, and so was unmade.

Will took a step back and then another. He froze at the third step, pausing as the world spun in a 180 around him, and everything started up again.

He used a paralytic, to start. One sharp needle to the neck and Tobias was collapsing in his arms. He was sturdy, but Will was strong. He picked him up without hardly any effort at all, and took him someplace out of the way. Someplace he could work.

He laid him out and slit him open, tapping his cheek every once and awhile to check his eyes. Tobias was awake for the whole thing, of course. The drugs kept him immobile but didn't give him the courtesy of unconsciousness. He was not deserving of such courtesy.

He took him apart then, emptying him out, piece by piece, not stopping even as his victim finally lost consciousness and then faded away. His work was not done until he was an empty shell, imposter that he was.

He dressed the body all up in a nice suit and brought him back to lay him out on the floor here. He had a dozen red roses with him, and threaded them deep into the throat, one thorny stem after another.

This was my design.

"So, how did he do it?" Matthew's voice jarred him back, and Will opened his eyes.

He stepped forward again, staring at the floor, before looking up into the fathomless rows of seats that surrounded the stage. "Looking for pointers?" he asked.

"I've never killed anyone," Matthew replied.

"You've thought about it," Will countered.

Matthew smirked. "So have you."

"Oh, I've done more than that," Will said dryly.

Matthew laughed brightly—it transformed him, making him seem weirdly innocent, so long as you ignored the reason he was laughing in the first place. "Trevor Morton," he realized. "Right. They don't talk about that too much. You were a hero when you were a beta, now the whole subject's taboo."

"No one wants to think an omega can kill," Will said.

"I wouldn't say 'no one,'" Matthew told him. "I think it's my favorite thing about you." He stepped forward, stalking Will's steps, but staying at least three feet away. "You never answered my question."

"I don't think what he did is as important as where he did it," Will said thoughtfully. "He risked a lot bringing him here. The level of security increased his odds of being caught. But he had to make a point."

"No one's safe from him?" Matthew asked.

"No *where* is safe from him," Will corrected, walking in a half circle around the space Tobias had been laid to rest. "He can do anything. He can go anywhere. He's untouchable."

"No one's untouchable," Matthew insisted.

"But when you believe it strongly enough, you can get close," Will said. He paused for a moment. His heart sped up as the realization hit him. The Ripper's crime scenes were usually chosen for display purposes, purely for the aesthetics, but never had any ties back to him. This one *did*. "Something happened *here*."

"They just had a performance the day before. An opera," Matthew said. "I know because Chilton was here, with some group of friends."

Will looked back at Matthew in shock. "What?"

"I know," Matthew snorted. "Who knew he had friends?"

Will stalked towards him, his brow furrowed. "That's not what I mean," he snapped. "He was here? The night before the body was found?"

"Yeah," Matthew said. "Wouldn't stop talking about it. Acted like he was so excited. Pretty sure he can't stand opera, just wants people to think he's 'cultured.'"

"That's—" Will started, but broke off. That was a strange coincidence, but that didn't mean it wasn't a coincidence. Chilton was a bottom-feeder, but he wasn't a murderer, and he wasn't clever enough to be the Ripper. Will would have already caught *him*.

But he couldn't ignore the connection. It meant something.

"Did you talk to him after the performance?" Will demanded. "Did he say if he saw Budge?"

"Nah, he doesn't really talk to me unless he's gloating about something. Budge was almost certainly here though, he's the type. I'm sure they at least talked. Budge couldn't stand Chilton, blamed him for losing his shot with Abigail. But he wasn't stupid, he would have played nice with him because he wanted a shot at you." He looked back at Will speculatively. "It really does all come back to you, doesn't it? What is your connection to the Chesapeake Ripper?"

"Hey, you're not supposed to be in here!"

Will and Matthew spun as a guard entered from the far side of the theater, waving a flashlight angrily. Matthew stepped in front of Will and nudged him back. "I'll handle this," he said, "wait here."

Matthew stalked forward, heading down the stage steps to meet the guard halfway. "Hey, man, it's all cool!" he said. "I'm a buddy of Devon's."

Will watched him for a moment, and then turned to eye the stairs on the other side. He was moving before he consciously made the decision, skidding down the steps and through a back exit that opened into another long hall. He didn't know where he was going, he knew there was nowhere to run—but he also craved just a single moment of solitude, a moment to think on his own, to *make his own choice*.

He spun down another hallway, trying to look for an exit sign, and saw someone turn the corner at the other end. He slid to a stop, his heart catching in his throat, unable to believe what he saw.

Hannibal was coming towards him from the other side of the hall.

Will lowered his head, pulling down his hood as he turned to head back the way he came. He only made it two steps before he was grabbed, merciless fingers wrapping around his arm and catching his hood to drag it down. Hannibal backed him up against the wall, looking genuinely shocked to see him.

Will hadn't known Hannibal was capable of being surprised, and felt a swell of pride at being the cause of it that really made no sense at all.

"Will," Hannibal breathed.

"Hannibal," Will replied, trying to keep his tone level. Each point where Hannibal was touching him felt alive, buzzing and humming and pressing into his veins like a shot of adrenaline. He'd never seen Hannibal face to face without being on suppressants, and it was an entirely different experience.

Hannibal's pupils nearly eclipsed his irises as he pulled in a shaking breath. He looked out of control, which made the situation even more surreal, because Hannibal and control were inseparable in Will's mind. Will had thought of Hannibal as a dam holding back a flood when they first met: now it felt like it was overrun, and washing over them both.

He thought for a moment that Hannibal might lean down to kiss him, and worse still, that he would *let him*, before the psychiatrist carefully lifted his hands off and away. Hannibal stumbled a step back, before reaching up to fix the knot in his tie. He looked disconcerted, but the new distance between them, as small as it was, helped them both.

Will reached back to put his own hands against the wall, and steady himself. "What's that saying?" he asked, recovering just slightly quicker, though his voice was a bit breathless, "Criminals always return to the scene of the crime?"

Hannibal's confusion segued seamlessly into annoyance, and he shot Will a censuring glance. "I've come to expect more sophisticated deductions from you, Will," he said. "I'm here at Jack's request. He wanted me to look through the surveillance tapes from Saturday's performance—to see if I noticed anyone watching Tobias Budge." He glanced at his watch. "I'm afraid it took longer than was expected, though perhaps fate intervened."

Hannibal crossed his arms then, raising an eyebrow. "Of the two of us, I'm the only one officially part of this investigation. I believe you're supposed to be safely tucked away within the walls of the OPA."

Hannibal looked more than a little impressed despite himself, and some buried instinct within Will was pleased at having pleased him. The more rational part was suspicious as hell. "How long have you been in New York?" he demanded.

"I've been here since last week, assisting first on the Olsson murder and now with this," Hannibal answered easily. "I'm a poor substitute for you, I'm afraid." He watched Will carefully. "I believe it's your turn to answer a question for me. How are you here?"

"Let's just say I've been making friends," Will said simply.

"And instead of running, you came to look at a crime scene?" he asked. "You could be halfway to Europe by now. Most of the countries there are far more forward thinking about omegas."

"Is that what you want?" Will asked challengingly. "For me to disappear? Because I was pretty sure you were thrilled when I was caught."

"I know you like to downplay our acquaintance, but I'm quite certain no one knows you as well as I do," Hannibal said. "I never wanted this for you."

"I wish I could believe that," Will answered.

"But you don't," he replied.

"No," Will agreed. "You're pretending to be someone you're not."

"I'm not pretending, not with you," Hannibal assured him. "You are the only one I have ever showed my true self, you just haven't seen it yet." He took a step closer, his black-flooded eyes burning. "But you will."

Will pushed back against the wall as he approached, but there wasn't anywhere for him to go. Hannibal placed his hands against the wall on either side of his head, careful to not actually touch him. "If you asked me, I would take you away from here," he promised. "We could go to Venice. You could be free."

Will tilted his eyes up, watching Hannibal warily from beneath his lashes. "Free, with conditions?" he asked, falsely sweet. "Free, so long as I was yours?"

Will reached his hands up, delicately running his fingers across Hannibal's lapels, and then he shoved him hard. Hannibal stumbled back, looking irritated, and Will glanced back down the hall, judging the distance. "I'm leaving now," he said firmly.

"By all means," Hannibal said agreeably, regaining his balance effortlessly. He made a sweeping a gesture down the hall, in an invitation Will did not entirely trust.

Will sucked in a deep breath, watching him warily. "You're not going to stop me?"

"If I did, I wouldn't get to see what you're planning next," Hannibal said. "I'd never rob myself of such a pleasure."

Will watched him a moment longer, then carefully pushed off the wall to retrace his steps. He was careful not to walk too quickly. Alphas were programmed like predators, and found it hard to resist fleeing prey.

"Oh, and Will?" Hannibal called after him. "I feel certain our paths are destined to cross again, whatever path you choose."

Will didn't respond, just fled back into the theater, closing the door behind him. Matthew was gone, and Will pressed his head against the door as he tried to steady his breathing. His encounter with Hannibal had managed to drive home how vulnerable he was without his suppressants—not just from alphas, but from *himself*.

Part of him still wanted to run, but without suppressants, without resources of any kind, he would certainly be caught and get Matthew caught in the process, which meant losing the

only card he had left to play. At least at the OPA, he already had a foothold back in the world. It wouldn't be that much longer and he might be able to negotiate an actual life for himself again.

And there was Abigail to think of, and his dogs.

Will made his way back to the lobby, and slipped past an irritable Devon to get out the front doors. He walked slowly back towards Matthew's car, enjoying the stars and fresh air and his last moments of freedom. Then he climbed up into the passenger seat, without bothering to look at Matthew, who sat calmly waiting in the driver's seat.

"I wasn't sure you were going to come back," Matthew said, tapping one hand on the steering wheel.

"Neither was I," Will admitted. "Would you have come after me?"

"Not really my style," he said. "I want a partner that wants me back." He grinned then. "Would have reported you missing to Chilton though, got to cover myself."

"I'm not the one that should be running," Will decided, turning to look at Matthew. "I want my life back."

"I'd burn that whole place down for you, if you asked," Matthew offered.

"Let's call that Plan B," Will said.

Matthew just laughed and pulled out, taking them back. When they reached the garage, Matthew had him take off the shoes and the hoodie and leave them in the car. Then he pulled him to the elevator, and put him in it alone.

"It's better if we only send it up once," he explained, as he activated the controls with his thumbprint and then hit the button for Will's floor.

"Thank you—" Will started haltingly. "It was nice to feel normal again."

"You've got a strange normal," Matthew said, and the doors closed between them.

As Will stood in his socks and pajamas in the elevator, heading back up to his prison, he felt strangely in control. The first time he was brought here, it was with him figuratively kicking and screaming.

This time he was here on his own terms.

The doors slid open onto his darkened floor, and Will cautiously slipped out of the elevator. The guards made their rounds every hour, but he trusted Matthew enough to know he would have timed this perfectly. He didn't encounter anyone on his way back to his room. Winston was waiting for him, still curled up on his bed.

Will let out another shaky breath. They'd actually gotten away with it.

He crawled into bed, letting Winston nudge his head up under his arm, and tried to keep his heartbeat under control. He felt shaky with adrenaline, his taste of freedom activating his blood. Seeing Hannibal had been unexpected, but somehow, it felt like a balancing of the scales. They had both controlled themselves.

Matthew had said there were two kinds of people, those who would take him and those who would turn him in. As he drifted near sleep, something occurred to him:

Hannibal hadn't done either one.

Chapter End Notes

Next Up: Will is set adrift in the world of high society, and makes a new enemy. Hannibal offers a lifeline, but it's his alter ego that Will decides to deal with.

caverns measureless to man

Chapter Notes

> Note: Hi guys! Here is another looonng one that will hopefully last you! I have been trying to update every Sunday/Monday, but have a few real life things coming up and also have made a few significant additions to my story outline that I need to figure out before I post the next chapter. So it might take me a couple weekends before the next update! But I will try to keep up the weekly postings if at all possible. It would be easier if the chapters didn't keep getting *longer* each time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The ballroom was beautiful, like something out of the 18th Century. Its seamless blend of Renaissance and Baroque reminded him of pictures he had come across of the Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi in Sicily, though the high ceiling was like nothing he had ever seen. It curved from all sides towards a crystal skylight at its center, pressed into the shape of a six-point star.

The dancers that surrounded him were eerily silent and no music was playing. There were no lights other than the candelabras that lined the outer walls, cloaking them all in shadow, and everyone wore the masks of a masquerade.

Everyone, that was, except for Will. Will's own face was bare, and so were his feet. He was wearing half of an expensive tuxedo, the shirt and pants, with no jacket, bow tie or belt.

He searched the crowd desperately for a familiar face, and felt relief when he finally recognized the set of one woman's jaw, and the severe press of her glossy red lips.

"Alana!" he called, rushing forward to get her attention, but her dance partner spun her further away into the crowd. Will frowned when he realized who it was—he could just make out Matthew's countenance beneath his wide panther mask.

He rushed to catch up, dodging the other dancers, and was finally close enough to reach out and grab her shoulder. She tilted beneath his hands, crumbling slightly, her head falling to the side. That was when he realized that the straight red line across her neck was not a necklace but a deep wound, gaping where the weight of her head pulled it up.

Her eyes watched him blankly from behind an intricate purple velvet butterfly mask, light bouncing off them with nothing left to reflect back. Matthew carelessly spun her into a dip, and Will saw that he had a hatchet buried so deeply within his spine that the vertebrae jutted out from it on both sides.

He backed away, tripping over someone's foot in his effort to get some distance. He startled back when saw it was Freddie Lounds, her carefully curled hair stained a darker red with

blood. It ran down the side of her face from a deep gash in her skull, slipping beneath the curve of one eye to leave behind blood trails like tears. Her mouth parted slightly when she was twirled by her partner, soundless, with the measured motion of a porcelain doll.

Will's heart started to pound as he realized all of the dancers were dead, and each of them had been attached to the ceiling by shining silver string. The strings pulled them along like marionettes, making their movements mimic a synchronized waltz.

He turned to look for an exit, anything to help him get away, and that's when he saw Hannibal. He was looking regal in a streamlined grey-blue suit, and there was not a single injury on him that Will could see.

Hannibal had no strings of his own. He was the one holding the wooden control bars for the bodies, and the strings spread out from it like a spider's web, crisscrossing and rising towards an elaborate set of pulleys overhead.

"Hannibal," he said, swallowing against the strange echo of his voice. Hannibal's eyes shot to his, the life in them magnified in contrast to the sightless stares aimed at him by all the other guests.

"I've been waiting for you," Hannibal said. "Come here."

Will tried to breathe, but it didn't feel like he was taking in any air. He looked back behind him, and the mass of dancers had all moved closer to block his way. He couldn't see any breaks against the walls, no doors or stairs to take him away.

*"Will, **come here**," Hannibal commanded, his voice sounding like a thunderclap as it carried across the quiet ballroom.*

Will found himself moving forward before any conscious decision was made, driven to get away from the dead that brushed up against him from all sides.

Hannibal grabbed him as soon as he was close enough and pulled him back against him. Will got tangled in the silver threads as he fell into Hannibal's arms, and they got wrapped around his wrist, his waist, his right leg. Hannibal paid them no attention, using his free hand to restrain him further, resting it like a gentle threat across his throat. He tilted Will's head back until it lay against his shoulder.

From the awkward angle Will could see light from the skylight reflecting across the strings, where they all lifted and fell like a tide in the moonlight.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Hannibal whispered against his ear.

But of course he wasn't talking about the strings.

Will shot up from his bed, gasping for air. He blinked sweat out of his eyes as he fell forward again, off balance but managing to catch himself with his hands. The nightmare fought to keep him, Hannibal's words echoing in the back of his mind even as he lay there with open eyes.

Isn't it beautiful?

He was just thankful he had woken up before he could agree with him.

Will forced himself back up to his knees and then glanced at the clock, wondering whether or not to be grateful it wasn't quite seven yet. His Unveiling was at six that night, which gave him a little less than twelve hours before he had to live it for real.

The last couple of days had been one horrible revelation after another as he was informed of his role in the ball. He would be introduced, and he would be required to dance with any alpha that asked at least once. He was not to drink. He was not to leave the main room without an approved escort. He was not to touch any alpha outside of a dance. He was not to allow any alpha to touch *him* outside of a dance.

The rules went on and on, ranging from arbitrary to insulting to common sense.

Alana would be arriving within the next hour or so, to help make arrangements for and then chaperone the ball. The only bright side was that at the moment he did ache just a bit to see her, because he wanted to erase the nightmarish vision of her standing there with her throat slit open.

Strangely enough, Freddie had provided an almost welcome distraction. The two daily questions she had sent him so far had been relatively innocuous: '*what's your favorite color (I honestly couldn't care less, but the public wants to know)*' and *'what does the Chesapeake Ripper do with his souvenirs'* . Will felt no particular loyalty to the FBI at the moment, so he answered both truthfully—blue, and he eats them.

He had used her phone to view her resulting stories. She did a short filler segment on her show about the world's newest registered omega (his favorite color is blue!) and a disturbing retrospective about the Chesapeake Ripper on her website, cataloguing the pieces of his victims that had been known to go missing and advising that a source close to the FBI had informed her the Ripper has been eating them.

Will was sure Jack was enraged about the leak. Will had put that in his original profile when he figured out the serial killer killed in 'sounders' and saw his victims more as livestock than as people, but it had managed to stay out of the press. Normally, they kept something back for a number of reasons, one being that they did not want any retribution from the killers themselves.

But Will was not expecting any backlash from the Ripper. This killer was too in control to be set off by some third-rate news site, and even if he were, he was distracted at the moment. Will didn't expect the leak to do any real harm, and if he ever saw Jack, he could tell him not to worry about it. But he hadn't seen Jack since Olsson's murder, and he was pretty sure Alana had him removed from his approved visitors list. He could always call him, but if he did it from *Freddie's* phone, Jack would figure out who the informant was pretty damn fast.

Will dragged himself to the shower, deciding not to worry about it. His days teaching and working with Jack seemed like a lifetime ago, though he'd been here less than a month. He

knew as much as he was getting his autonomy back piece by tiny piece, he would never get back what he'd had.

Making deals with devils like Freddie and Matthew to get himself even the smallest connection to his former life oscillated between seeming desperate and seeming necessary, and he wondered what else he would be willing to compromise to get back some semblance of independence.

He shed his clothes before stepping into the shower. Even with his bug jammer, the only room he felt completely at ease in was the bathroom. He pressed his forehead against the pristine tiles as the water crashed down along his back, and just tried to breathe.

He didn't know how long he stood there, but finally he forced himself to move again and actually wash up. When he finished and pulled back the curtain, his white robe was hovering there in air waiting for him. Will narrowed his eyes and leaned out. Matthew stood there holding the robe out to him, watching unrepentantly.

"Son of a bitch," Will muttered, snatching the robe to pull it on behind the curtain.

"I like your hair longer," Matthew told him. "And the wet look suits you."

"I thought we talked about knocking," Will snapped.

"This is important," Matthew said, as he leaned back against the wall, "and required privacy."

"You got it?" Will asked, his eyes widening hopefully as he pulled the shower curtain back to look at Matthew.

"The final guest list," he said, producing a piece of folded notebook paper from his pocket with a flourish.

Will grabbed it from him, pushing wet curls out of his eyes as he unfolded it. Traditionally twenty-five eligible alphas were invited, along with a few omegas and some very important betas. There were fifty-three total on the list, and each name had their designation in parenthesis beside it. He frowned when he only noticed one other omega. "Only one omega was invited?"

"It makes them nervous to have too many omegas at the same place," Matthew shrugged. "General rule is only omegas in surrounding states are invited to an Unveiling. That's three invited, but two are already mated, and the mated ones always politely decline. Their alphas don't much like them being around a bunch of unmated alphas. Tends to lead to bloodshed."

Matthew reached out, pulling up Will's robe where it had started to slip down his shoulder. "Which just leaves you with Margot Verger," he added. "Lovely girl, by all accounts, but her brother's a total psycho."

"Her brother?" Will asked.

"Mason Verger," Matthew said, his lip curling slightly in disgust. "Alpha heir to the Verger estate. The Vergers have had at least one omega every generation going back almost a

hundred years. They're sort of like royalty, but not the kind you'd ever want to meet. He's a real piece of work."

Will quickly scanned the list. He was unsurprised to find Dr. Hannibal Lecter was only the third one down. "Verger's not on the list."

"He wouldn't be," Matthew agreed. "I doubt he'd make it past the vetting process, but he doesn't have to. He gets an automatic invite as Margot's defacto escort. You need to stay away from him."

"If it were up to me, I'd be staying away from all of them," Will said dryly.

"Present company excluded, I hope," Matthew said.

"You don't count," Will said dismissively. He didn't have time to regret his words—it took less than a second, and Matthew had him trapped against the bathroom counter, the guest list fluttering to the floor.

Matthew bracketed him in with his hands on either side of him, the weight of his body pressing in on him enough that Will could feel the edge of the sink leaving an imprint on his back.

Will cursed himself for forgetting, even for a second, just how dangerous Matthew was.

"I don't count?" Matthew asked silkily. He leaned his head to the side, running it up along the side of Will's neck, careful to stay just exactly an inch away from actually touching his skin. "I'm a predator, Will. Don't kid yourself."

Will let out a careful breath, keeping very still. If he tried to move away, it might set him off. "But you're one with a very different appetite," he said gently. "You don't want to possess me."

"Possessions don't interest me," Matthew agreed, turning his head back so he could look Will in the eye. "Easy to come by, easy to lose." Matthew reached out then, placing his hands along the curve of Will's collarbone. "I just want to be understood."

Will knew the effect skin contact with alphas tended to have. He thought about Hannibal's touch, which was akin to finding himself in the eye of an electric storm. Matthew's hands in contrast were cold and smooth, and did nothing more than cause goose bumps to spread out from the point of contact.

It felt *wrong*. He didn't want to be trapped in a bond with an alpha anyway. He didn't want to live in one of Abigail's love stories.

He *should* want what Matthew was offering—companionship without the restrictions, friendship without the obligation—but instead it just left him empty and chilled.

He reached up to grab Matthew's wrists, gently tugging them away. "Matthew, I—"

He broke off at a knock on the front door, and Matthew pushed away from him. Will reached down to grab the guest list, sticking it in the robe's pocket as he turned to glance at himself in the mirror. He looked slightly debauched, despite the fact that nothing had actually happened. Matthew looked almost flushed.

They'd been so careful to time their discussions so as not to be interrupted—the one time they finally had control slip, and someone was here.

"Go to your bedroom," Matthew said. "I'll get the door."

"Matthew," Will started.

"Go, it's fine," he insisted.

Will didn't argue. Even though he couldn't be what Matthew wanted, he couldn't be *without* Matthew. He was the one advantage he had here, and if he got fired or reassigned, Will would be nearly back at square one.

He went into the bedroom, quickly getting into a pair of soft flannel pants. He was just pulling a t-shirt over his head when there was a soft knock on his bedroom door. He tossed the robe on a chair, and opened the door.

Alana gave him an awkward wave, and Will let out a breath, relieved to see her in one piece. Winston was stuck to her side, watching her adoringly, his tail thumping on the carpet. He didn't know where Winston had been sleeping, but tried not to feel offended that it apparently took Alana's arrival for him to make an appearance.

"Hi, Will," she said. She was wearing a white blouse with what looked like water-colored red flowers printed up both sides and down beside the buttons along the front, with a matching red skirt and heels. She looked as amazing as she always did, basically, and Will felt naked standing there in front of her in what amounted to pajamas.

She frowned a little herself as she took in his appearance, her trained mind already becoming suspicious before he'd even said a word. "One of your guards let me in," she said casually. "Was he in here with you alone?"

"I had a nightmare," Will said. "Mr. Brown is a medic, he was making sure I was alright."

"Oh," she said, successfully thrown off the scent. She stood awkwardly in the door, making no move to come closer without an invitation. "About Trevor Morton?"

The question annoyed him, and he almost told her what he'd really been dreaming about. Instead, he stepped aside and motioned her in. "No," he said. "I haven't thought of him in awhile."

It was something he hadn't really consciously realized. He didn't know what it meant that Hannibal had seamlessly taken up the empty space that Trevor had left behind in his mind.

Alana swung a garment back over her shoulder as she entered, tossing it carefully to lie out on the bed. "Well, you should just be careful. You shouldn't be alone with anyone in your

bedroom," she said.

"I'm alone with you," he said, crossing his arms.

"Yes, but you've known me for years," Alana said, glancing at him in surprise.

It made him realize that Alana had no idea they weren't friends. She had carefully cultivated his friendship for so long—making sure not to do anything wrong, anything that would make him uncomfortable. Careful to not say the wrong thing, not bring up his work.

She had completely missed that in her concerted effort not to treat him like a patient, she had ended up treating him like a patient.

Matthew was dangerous and had motivations that Will had yet to fully understand, but he trusted him with his secrets—which meant he actually trusted Matthew more than he trusted Alana. Alana had given away every secret of his she knew, and none of her good intentions could make up for that.

"What's in the bag?" he asked, not wanting to argue about it.

"Your suit for the ball," she said, looking pleased, and Will wished he'd chosen to have the argument.

"No," he snapped.

"You haven't even seen it!" she said in surprise, before frowning slightly. "There's a very specific dress code. You can't go in flannel."

Will had thought about it, just to spite everyone, but he had his suspicions Chilton would never let him get away with it. He'd probably call the whole thing off first—and while that sounded like a good thing in theory, in practice it would be a set back he might not recover from.

He forced himself to look when Alana unzipped the garment bag, and had to admit it could have been worse. He was sure Alana had a hand in it. It started simple enough, slacks in plain black, and the shirt in plain white. Then there was a dark purple waistcoat, with a faint paisley design visible only in certain light. There was a thin black tie, and matching black socks.

There was no jacket, and he knew its absence was meant to set him apart from the alphas that would be there.

Still, it could have been worse. It was more than he'd been allowed in his dream.

"Chilton said you already had shoes," Alana said. "Have you tried them on?"

"Yes," Will said, heading to the closet. He still kept Freddie's phone in the shoes, so slipped it into one of the hanging jacket's pockets when Alana was turned away. He paused as he glanced back through the jackets, finding a sleek black blazer standing out amongst the rest. As he rose with the shoes, he pulled it off the hanger too.

"There," he said, tossing them both on the bed with the rest of the suit. "That should do it, right?"

Alana frowned a little at the jacket. "I wish you wouldn't do this."

"Do what?" he asked innocently. "You don't think it matches?"

"I don't care about the jacket, Will. I just wish you wouldn't fight this, every step of the way," she explained. "You could be happy if you let yourself."

"I asked someone once when they were going to try and find someone to be happy with," Will said. "You know what she said to me? She said she thinks too much. She couldn't be with someone, because she thinks too much." He looked back up at her, and knew she would remember her own words. "It must be nice to have the option to opt-out. Or do you expect me to just stop thinking?"

"Of course not," she said, her voice soft and soothing, though it did nothing to reassure him. Not anymore. "You should be able to opt-out if that's what you want. In a perfect world, you would be able to. But this world is far from perfect."

"And that doesn't bother you?" he asked.

"I'm a psychiatrist," she said. "It's my job to change how my patients' perceive the world, not the world itself."

"Maybe it's your own perception you should question," he told her.

"You know," Alana said quietly, stepping up beside him to smooth out the jacket, "you have more power than you think." She glanced over at him. "They can keep you here, but that's pretty much all they can do. They can't actually force you to do anything."

"Yes, my options are limitless," he said dryly. "Should I go for a leisurely swim? Pick flowers in the green house? Run circles around the entryway? Works for Winston."

"I'm going to let you in on a little secret," Alana told him. "In this instance, the double-standard is actually to your advantage. You can do pretty much anything to an alpha you want, and they can't touch you. If you sucker punch one in the middle of a dance, there's nothing they can do about it. If they try to retaliate, to hurt or restrain you, they'll be arrested for assault against an omega. If they just try to report you to the OPA, they'll get a mark in their file that says they're antagonistic with and unable to interact properly with an omega, and find themselves knocked off the vetted list."

Will looked at Alana with surprise. As a consultant for the OPA, she had insight to their processes that few did. He never expected her to share any of them with *him*. For the first time since this started, it felt like she could really be on his side.

"That's not to say there are no consequences," she cautioned quickly, probably seeing the possibilities chasing each other through Will's eyes. "Chilton will use any action he can against you to reinforce to the OPA that you're unstable and require his care."

"He'll do that no matter what I do," Will reasoned. "They're never going to let me out on my own again anyway, we both know that. There's not much benefit to playing nice."

"And what about Hannibal?" Alana asked, her tone of voice was cautious and he knew she was hesitant to bring it up. "You do know he'll be there?"

"Hannibal," he repeated, watching her for a moment before he realized the reason for her hesitation, what she was actually *suggesting*. "You think I should *bond* with Hannibal? I barely even know him."

"But you're drawn to him," she insisted. "I was there with you when you met him, remember? I thought it was so strange then the way you just froze up…but you could sense it, couldn't you? He's compatible." She sighed softly. "And he's been worried sick about you."

Hannibal hadn't exactly seemed worried sick when Will had run into him at the opera house, but it wasn't as though that was something he could enter as evidence. "I froze up because I was worried he would sense what I was," Will said. "It wasn't anything more than that. Hannibal isn't anything to me."

"You know that isn't true," she insisted. "Don't punish him just because he's an alpha."

"Why not?" he asked. "I'm being punished for being an omega."

"You're really not," Alana insisted. "Will, it is amazing that you're an omega. It's a wonderful thing, and I wish you had never felt as though you needed to hide it."

She reached out as though she wanted to touch him, but pulled back. Her psychiatrist's mind probably already running rings around them both, deciding he would be feeling cornered and wouldn't want to be touched. A true friend would have reached out without the second thoughts.

"Look, we don't have to discuss this now. Or at all, if that's what you want. I need to visit Abigail, anyway," she said after a moment. "Maybe it's best if you just take it easy for awhile, then get yourself ready. Alright?"

He frowned. "You know Abigail?"

"I was her psychiatrist when she was first brought in, it was how I started working with the OPA," Alana explained. "She didn't react…well to Chilton, at first."

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" he asked.

"I don't discuss my patients with anyone," she explained gently. "But Abigail told me how fond she is of you. She wanted to be there at the ball with you."

"She's coming?" he asked in surprise. As much as he wanted the moral support, he wasn't sure if it was a good idea to have her suffer the alphas' attentions right along with him.

"Chilton wouldn't allow it, and she's a little upset about it," she said. "She was supposed to have her Unveiling last year. She thinks she never will now, that it was cancelled because she

was marked. Of course, if anything, you should be an inspiration. Your Unveiling was supposed to be sixteen years ago, yet here we are."

"'Inspirational' wouldn't be the word I'd choose," Will said flatly.

"Just try to relax, okay?" Alana asked quietly. "I'm going to visit Abigail and work out some final details for the ball, but I'll be back for you in a few hours."

* * * * * *

Will had put off getting ready as long as he could.

He'd spent most of the day watching the pre-Unveiling news shows, It gave him an opportunity to put faces to the names on Matthew's list, and learn a little more about the alphas. Mason seemed even worse than advertised, though Margot seemed nice enough. When he realized it was five-thirty, he finally forced himself to get into the suit.

It fit him perfectly, of course, but he was past letting little details like how they might have gotten his measurements bother him. Instead he just buttoned up the waistcoat and slipped into the shoes, and then stared at his reflection without recognizing the man that stared back.

His hair was getting too long, the curls twisting around his ears as though they'd been styled that way. His face was smooth though he hadn't shaved since he arrived. His eyes looked strange, clearer than he was used to. It was a small comfort, but at least he did not resemble in the slightest how he had appeared in his dream.

"Well, look at you. You do clean up nicely, after all."

Will tilted his eyes up but kept them on the mirror, catching Chilton's reflection standing in the doorway behind him. "Does no one bother to knock anymore?" he asked.

"Consider this a surprise inspection," Chilton said. "You are on watch, after all. The OPA is not entirely convinced you are not a danger to yourself. Privacy is a privilege you no longer have a right to."

"The OPA?" Will asked, turning to pick the jacket up off the bed. Chilton pursed his lips when he saw it, but didn't comment on it. "Or you?"

"Is there a difference?" Chilton asked slyly. "I know you've been unhappy. I'm sorry about that. But you should consider, it can get worse."

"Are you threatening me?" Will asked.

"Tonight will decide your future," Chilton said. "That's not a threat, it's just a fact. It's like that for all omegas. Your first introduction to society, to the alphas that will be setting out to court you. You may be a little late, but it won't be any different for you. If anything, it'll push the timetable up."

"You act like you want me to succeed in finding an alpha," Will said. "But I think you want me to screw up so you can keep me here."

"Maybe," Chilton said. "Or maybe you're more trouble than you're worth."

"Then cut me loose," Will said calmly, pressing his hands into the pockets of his blazer. "We'd never have to see each other again."

Chilton snorted, his eyes going to the window. It was an avoidance technique a psychiatrist should have known better than to use. Will knew the moment he did it that he was about to broach a topic he'd rather not. "What is your connection to Dr. Lecter?"

"What's yours?" Will countered. "You're not friends, but you do him favors. So either he has something on you or he has something you want."

"Dr. Lecter is a colleague, and my relationship to him is none of your concern," he snapped. He turned back to glare at Will now, but it was too late for him to pretend. Will knew who had the upper hand. "Now, what is your connection to him?"

"Dr. Lecter is a colleague, and my relationship to him is none of your concern," Will echoed. He blinked innocently as he watched Chilton flush. "You're worried about seeing him. Why?"

"I don't think you've properly grasped your position," Chilton said primly. "I am your psychiatrist, not the other way around."

"I don't have the patience for psychiatry," he said. "They want to talk you round and round until you realize what's wrong with you. I can just see it, first time out. And you're terrified of him." He narrowed his eyes. "What does he have on you?"

"Is everything okay in here?" Alana asked, as she stepped inside the room. She had changed into a floor length cream-colored gown, with a simple diamond necklace as her only accessory.

"It's perfectly fine," Chilton said, grinning tightly. He clasped his hands together, glancing back at Alana once before warningly returning his attention to Will. "Are you ready then?"

He left without waiting for a response. Alana rolled her eyes, and then stepped forward to gently take Will's arm. "You look very handsome," she said. "The suit's not so bad, right? And you were right to add the jacket. It brings everything together."

He knew it was an apology, so he took it as it was intended. "You look lovely, Alana," he told her, and she smiled at him.

They took the elevator up to the top floor, and the doors opened into a circular entry room that curved towards a large set of double doors. Chilton didn't bother to look back at him as he stepped forward to pull them open, clearing his throat as he did. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he called to the waiting guests. "I am happy to introduce you to William Graham, the newest registered omega in the United States."

Alana gave him a gentle nudge forward, and Will reluctantly followed Chilton into the ballroom. The room was laid out more like a high school dance than the elaborate masquerade of his nightmare. It was still beautiful and elegant, but with muted colors and

very well lit. There was even a buffet table at one end with a punch bowl and what looked like shrimp cocktails.

He did not see Hannibal in the crowd of faces, and then was irritated at himself for having tried to seek him out before anyone else. A second glance of the room had him spotting the Vergers. Margot was wearing a pained, plastic smile, and not meeting anyone's eyes. Mason was staring straight at him while he tugged at his sister's arm to keep her close.

He looked for more alphas from the list, and that's when he realized they were *all* looking back at him, and not just the alphas, but the betas and even Margot.

He realized then he didn't know what he was supposed to do. Give a bow? Give a speech? He glanced back at Alana, but she just sent him an encouraging smile.

Well, if no one had told him he had to do anything, he supposed there wasn't anything he had to do. Ignoring the stares, he just wandered off towards the buffet table. He was grateful when the chatter started up behind him, the moment apparently over.

"You're going to have to get used to being the center of attention, gorgeous."

Will glanced over at the speaker, fighting not to roll his eyes. He recognized the man from the news: Gregory Briggs, a wealthy politician of some kind, though Will couldn't recall his actual title. He'd been filed away in the back of his mind as not a real threat.

"Gregory Briggs," the alpha said, his hands safely in his pockets. An unmated alpha offering to shake an omega's hand was never considered good manners. He was either in his late forties or early fifties, distinguished with a spattering of silvered hair mixed in against a dark brown. He had a perfect smile that had probably served him well in his chosen line of work, but didn't do much to persuade Will he was worth any of his time.

Will turned back to look at the shrimp cocktails lined up along the table. They looked like miniature pieces of art. He wondered if Alana had told them he liked seafood.

Gregory cleared his throat, obviously not sure what to make of being ignored. "I would be honored if you would have your first dance with me," he said politely.

"No, thank you," Will told him,

Gregory's toothpaste ad smile flickered out, and he looked instantly annoyed. "Didn't they tell you how this works?"

"They did," Will agreed.

Gregory reached out and grabbed his arm, jerking him closer by a step. "Listen, omega, when I ask—"

"Remove your hand," Will interrupted calmly. Gregory was startled enough to stop his own tirade, but not quick enough on the draw to do as he'd been told. "I won't ask again."

Gregory just narrowed his eyes, his irritation growing, so Will picked up one of the small forks lined up along the table, then stabbed it straight through the back of the hand that gripped his arm.

Gregory pulled away with an angry yelp, dragging the bloody fork back out of his hand. He looked up at Will in disbelief. "You little beast."

"I was told not to let an alpha touch me outside of a dance, I'm only following protocol," Will said ingeniously. "But it you would like to file a complaint against me with the OPA, I would encourage you to do so."

Will was willing to deal with Chilton's therapy a little longer if it meant Gregory Briggs got himself off the vetted list. He could already see the controlling, obsessive personality—he wasn't fit to be with anyone, let alone entered into a bond that couldn't be dissolved.

Gregory slammed the bloody fork down on the table and then stomped off towards the doors, leaving without another word: one down, only twenty-four to go.

"Did you just stab that alpha with a shrimp fork?"

Will glanced to his side in surprise. Hannibal stood there watching him with a fondness that his actions really hadn't warranted.

"It was an accident," Will said.

"You pushed it in to the root," Hannibal pointed out.

"I lost my balance," he said, before looking Hannibal over. His suit was a light cream, nearly white, pinstriped in gold. It stood out amongst the traditional black and white tuxes worn by every other alpha present, and Mason Verger, who was wearing a scarlet tie, was the only other alpha to break the pattern. Will knew it was intentional, and not the only thing he'd done to set himself apart. "You're late."

"Yes," Hannibal sighed, his voice tinged with remorse Will did not believe for a moment. "I'm sorry, I—"

"No, you're not," Will said.

Hannibal looked slightly taken aback. "Excuse me?"

"I surprised you at the opera house. For however small a moment, you lost control," Will told him, stepping closer to the alpha. It was strange, but meeting Hannibal's eyes was never as uncomfortable as it was with everyone else. "Now you're overcompensating, trying to project disinterest. You're the only alpha that arrived late, the rest were here waiting. You want to set yourself apart."

"I had no idea I was so transparent," Hannibal said wryly. "How do you know I didn't simply encounter traffic on the way here?"

"Because if you'd wanted to be here on time, you would have been," Will said.

"I think you're giving me too much credit," Hannibal said.

"On the contrary," Will said, "I don't think I've been giving you enough." He lifted a flute of champagne from a passing waiter's tray, and downed it in one go, impervious to the chagrined looks of the other guests.

Hannibal just watched him, amused, a smirk threatening at his lips. "Oh?"

"What are you doing with Chilton?" he asked. "He's afraid of you."

"I may have some influence over him, but it's nothing nefarious, I assure you," Hannibal said. "I simply have some knowledge of his practices before he was employed by the OPA, which may well call into question his qualifications for the position he currently holds."

"Meaning you're blackmailing him with some case of past malpractice," Will realized. "And you used that against him just to call me? What else have you had him do? He wouldn't be this upset over a phone call."

"This is hardly the place for this conversation, Will," Hannibal said.

"It's not as though I can leave," Will pointed out. "This is about as private as my life gets, these days."

"I must admit I'm at a loss as to why you are so outraged on Dr. Chilton's behalf," Hannibal said.

"It isn't about that. I think you're playing us, all of us," Will said. "I just can't figure out to what end. If you really just wanted to court me, you've been doing a terrible job."

"Have I?" Hannibal asked calmly. "And yet here you are, talking to me, out of everyone else here."

It was a point Will couldn't really refute. Hannibal may not have managed to make him *lovesick*, but he had snared him all the same. Will found himself thinking of him more than he was comfortable with, and almost without his notice, Hannibal had taken up the starring role in his nightmares. He hadn't even seen Trevor for days, and it was Hannibal's voice now that was sneaking in with every stray thought.

"You're absolutely right," Will decided, turning away from him. He just barely caught sight of Hannibal's look of irritation before he got lost in the crowd. He tried to sidestep some of the dancers, but stopped in surprise when he noticed Alana was dancing with none other than Margot Verger on the other side of the room.

"Don't they look lovely?" someone asked.

Will turned to respond, only to find himself standing right in front of Mason Verger. The other man took full advantage of his surprise, catching Will's wrist with one hand and using the other to press him closer by the small of his back. Before Will realized what was happening, they were dancing.

"Let me go," Will said, twisting carefully at his bound wrist to try and slip it free.

"I don't think so," Mason said. His voice was amiable and almost cheerful, a strange contrast to the soul Will could see residing deep down in blue eyes. "Stop me if you'd like, but I warn you, you stick a fork in *me*, and I'll consider it foreplay."

Will let himself be lead along, deciding against making another scene. If Mason had seen him stabbing Gregory, most likely everyone else had too. That was going to be hard enough to talk his way out of without adding an incident with Verger too.

So instead of fighting to get himself free, Will turned to look at Mason and *saw*:

Mason Verger was an uninhibited sadist. He was like a child that had never learned he couldn't have everything he wanted, and he never wanted anything good. He liked causing pain because he liked the fallout. He liked to see his victims broken, crying, lost. He wanted to crush the spirit of everyone he ever met.

"You're wasting your time with me," Will told him.

"How so?" Mason asked, leading him into a turn. Will could see Hannibal watching unhappily from beside the buffet table. Alana and Margot had stopped dancing to watch in concern. It felt like everyone was watching them, and everyone knew what Mason was, but no one knew how to stop him.

"I have no intention of taking a mate," Will explained. "And even if I did, I can promise that it wouldn't be you."

Mason threw his head back and laughed, a strange unfiltered sound of honest amusement. He tightened his grip on Will's wrist as he brought his head back down, until it felt as though he had his fingers held to the bone. "But I like it when someone plays hard to get," he said. "Makes the game more fun, wouldn’t you say?"

"I don't want to play games with you," Will said. "I've already killed one alpha that thought he could claim me, and he was a hell of a lot stronger than you."

"Strength is a state of mind," Mason countered. "I wouldn't be so certain you have the measure of mine."

"I think I have your measure fine," Will said.

"Do you?" Mason asked, grinning. "Well, tell me then. Who am I?"

"You most likely suffer from narcissistic personality disorder," Will told him, as Mason lead him into anther turn. "Which pairs frighteningly well with your penchant for sadism, and has left you entirely unable to care for anyone but yourself. The only time you feel anything real is when you're making others suffer. I imagine your sister bears the brunt of it."

"Never touched her," Mason denied instantly, but his eyes told another story. Will could see every dark thought passing through them like watching into a house from an open window.

They gave away every lie he told. He didn't want to see it, but knew he couldn't afford to look away.

"Not all abuse is physical," Will said. "You're able to satisfy your urges with emotional torture." Will frowned as he watched him. "I would guess that you enjoy making her cry."

"I thought you were supposed to be brilliant?" Mason said, sneering slightly, though he did not seem upset so much as *eager*. "I will have you know, I have given my sister absolutely anything that she could ever want."

"She's a means to an end, a status symbol," Will said. "She's your ticket to these parties—your only way in. You never would have been vetted without her. I imagine you encourage her not to take a mate, because you don't want to give up your position."

"Actually, she doesn't *want* an alpha," Mason told him, his voice strangely gleeful. "My poor darling sister is only attracted to betas, of all things, which means it's up to me to find myself an omega and have the next generation of little omega Vergers." He leaned forward, nearly pressing their cheeks together, his heavy breaths catching on his ear. "Spoiler alert: I've chosen you."

Will stepped back, stumbling over the rhythm of their dance, but managing to gain a little distance. "That's never going to happen," he promised.

"Never say never, my dear," Mason said. "Everyone has their price."

"Even the OPA doesn't actually *sell* omegas," Will snapped. "You can't buy me from them."

"Oh, I wasn't talking about *their* price," Mason grinned, "I was talking about *yours*. You may not know what it is, but you do have one. Some want to be rewarded, some need to be put into debt. But everyone has a tipping point—and they all give in when I find it."

"Everyone knows my secrets these days, you can't blackmail me," Will told him. "And I'm afraid my wants and yours are mutually exclusive."

"Perhaps, but I always get what I want, and I've decided I want you," Mason said, his cheerful, high voice lowering like a promise. "You could make it easy on yourself, and just give in now."

"I was going to say the same thing to you," Will said. "I've been told that I'm more trouble than I'm worth. It's something you might want to take to heart."

"Well, I didn't think it'd be that easy," Mason laughed. "The kids'll have spirit at least, huh?" His grin slipped as he felt a tap on his shoulder, and he paused long enough to glare back.

"May I cut in?" Hannibal asked politely. He was completely unfazed by the dark look Mason gave him, and used the other man's distraction to smoothly take his place.

Hannibal's hand spread out at his back, high enough to be perfectly proper, while his other loosely clasped Will's hand. He took the first step, leading them away from Verger and into

the center of the floor. Will took a shaky breath as Hannibal's touch seemed to sink through his skin.

"I didn't need a rescue," he said irritably. "I was handling him."

"I'm quite sure that you were," Hannibal agreed easily. "I do wish I could have been there when you dispatched Trevor Morton. I bet you were glorious."

It seemed to be a non sequitur, but Will could follow Hannibal's thinking. If anything, it was unnerving how well Hannibal had followed *his* thinking, as he had been comparing Mason's unwanted advances to Morton's just moments before.

He saw Hannibal give a slight nod, his eyes trained across the room, and turned to look. Matthew was returning the nod casually, from where he leaned back against the far wall. "What—" he started.

"He was not pleased Verger was holding you hostage on the dance floor," Hannibal said. "I imagine he isn't allowed to interfere himself, so requested me to intercede. It's perfectly acceptable for another alpha to request to cut in."

Will glanced back at Matthew worriedly, wishing he'd thought to warn him about Hannibal. For some reason, the thought of them interacting made him more than a little nervous, but Hannibal had a habit of being at the right place at the right time: the exact right man that everyone needed for whatever had happened to come up.

Will felt the vibrations of a low growl against his chest before he heard the sound. He looked up at Hannibal in surprise, to find him staring at their intertwined hands. "He marked you."

Will glanced to the side, where Hannibal carefully turned their hands. There was a small blue smudge on the inside of his wrist, a forming bruise in the shape of a fingerprint.

"I'm not yours, Hannibal," Will reminded him.

"You're not his, either," he said darkly.

"That we can agree on," Will said, which was all it took for Hannibal to regain his usually ironclad control. The other man slowed down the dance as the song neared its end, before easily releasing him.

"I have promised Alana a dance," Hannibal said, "but perhaps you would save another for me before the end of the night?"

He knew Hannibal wouldn't force the issue if he turned him down, but Will found he didn't really want to. He would prefer dancing with Hannibal to nearly everyone else here. "We'll see," he said.

Hannibal smiled slightly, and then slipped away. Will pushed his way back off the dance floor before he could be grabbed again, and dropped down at one of the small circular tables in the corner of the room. He barely had time to steady his breathing before someone was dropping into the chair next to him.

He looked up, ready to scare them off, but paused when he saw that it was Margot Verger.

Margot was undeniably beautiful, with an air of fragility that was often cultivated amongst omegas, though in her case didn't seem staged. She looked like a starlet from the forties, her silky brown hair pressed into a wave and then pulled back and piled on top of her head.

"My brother is already on the phone, making plans for the wedding," Margot told him casually, as though they were already old friends. Unlike her brother, her eyes were closed, and gave nothing away. She'd learned to hide herself away. "He'll have to marry me off first, of course, now that he doesn't need me any longer."

Will frowned. "He can't force you into a bond with an alpha."

"Don't be naïve, of course he can," Margot said simply. Will noted that she was holding a nearly empty flute of Champagne, apparently about as interested in the OPA's restrictions as he was himself. "He only needs to make the alternative so unbearable that I'll do anything he wants in order to avoid it."

"Why don't you report him?" Will asked.

"My family owns the OPA," Margot explained. "Our donations have kept them running, and my brother has blackmail material on all the important members. They can't touch him. When I first tried to get help getting away from him, I ended up institutionalized in a place not unlike this, undergoing therapy to cure me of my buried resentment and delusions about my loving brother."

Will felt his heart go out to her. She was even more trapped than he was, stuck with an alpha that had all of the power and none of the instinct to protect. "I can help you," he told her. "If you just—"

"I didn't come here to solicit your help for myself," she interrupted softly. "I came to warn you so you could help yourself. It's far too late for me."

"Warn me?" he asked.

"My brother is determined to have you. Your only option now is to bond with another alpha before he can get to you," Margot told him earnestly, before rising gracefully to her feet. "I would suggest you don't wait too long."

Will stayed hidden at his corner table as she left, considering what she'd said. It was an elegant solution. Verger could do nothing to him if he had an alpha mate. It didn't matter who he blackmailed or bribed, a bond could not be undone. Even if his mate were killed, Will would be protected from having to enter another bond for years at the very least, and Mason didn't strike him as the patient type.

But Will had no intention of surrendering his independence to a lesser evil just to preempt Mason from making an attempt to court him.

He managed to sit alone at the table for the better part of an hour. None of the other alphas seemed inclined to ask him to dance, which he could only be grateful for. Mason stalked around the ballroom like a rabid hyena, smirking at him from all corners of the room, but didn't actually approach him again.

Hannibal was the one to finally approach, holding out a hand for him to take. "Would you honor me with a dance?" he asked politely.

He almost declined, but the lure of intelligent conversation was too tempting to deny himself. He took Hannibal's hand.

"I thought I would have to cut in again, but it doesn't appear you've been in the mood to dance," Hannibal said.

"No one else has asked," Will told him. "They seem to be keeping their distance."

"That's because they're frightened of you," Hannibal said, sounding both proud and amused.

"But you're not?" Will asked.

"People are frightened of what they don't understand, Will," Hannibal said. "I understand you perfectly."

Will's hand was tingling where they touched. He was reminded of South American dart frogs, known for secreting poison from their skin, because it seemed as though Hannibal's touch was toxic. It always left him breathless and dizzy, and he felt as though he'd fall the moment he let go.

"I don't want to lead you on," Will told him.

"I'm the one leading you," Hannibal pointed out.

"I wasn't talking about the dance," he said impatiently.

"Nor was I," Hannibal agreed amiably. He tugged Will slightly closer, though his grip was loose and not restricting. Will could slip free any time he'd like—it was a power play, he knew. Hannibal was giving him the option to pull away, because it just made it all the more significant when he didn't do it.

Will turned to meet Hannibal's eyes. It was getting easier for him to do. He didn't know if maybe the suppressants really had been exasperating his condition, or if he was just so starved for human contact that he would take whatever he could get. Hannibal watched him with a bemused grin, well aware of his issues with maintaining eye contact.

"What do you want with me?" he asked.

"You've asked me that before," Hannibal reminded him.

"And you've yet to answer the question to my satisfaction," Will snapped. "You're successful, brilliant, you could have anyone. Why are you wasting your time with someone that doesn't

want you? Or is it just the chase? Will you forget about me in a second if I ever let you catch me?"

"That theory relies on a false assumption," Hannibal said. "You said you don't want me, but here you are. You are perfectly capable of turning down unwanted advances, I've seen it for myself."

"I respect you," Will said. "It doesn't mean I want to bond with you."

"You want to know what I think?" Hannibal asked. "I think you don't know what you want. I think you've had everything taken from you, and you're still trying to get it back. You can't look forward yet—but you will have to, eventually."

"You don't think I deserve to have my life back?" Will asked.

"I think you deserve a far better life than the one you had," Hannibal asked.

"And do you decide what that life is?" Will asked tightly.

"Of course not," Hannibal said. "That decision will be yours, just as soon as you are ready to make it."

The music had stopped without their notice, and everyone was watching them curiously. Will stepped out of Hannibal's arms, his tingling skin fighting to reach back for him hard enough that he had to cross his arms to keep from embarrassing himself.

"Will," Alana said, approaching cautiously. "Chilton wants you safely back in your room before everyone starts heading out. Are you ready to go?"

"God, yes," Will said gratefully, turning to the doors without glancing back.

Hannibal let him leave without calling him back, which Will was grateful for. He and Alana managed to slip away and straight into the elevator. He moved to lean against the back as she activated it for his floor.

"You know, when I was giving you that advice," Alana said as the elevator doors closed, "I didn't intend for you to go around stabbing alphas with the silverware."

"There was only the one," he told her. "Let's not exaggerate."

That startled a laugh out of her, and she always looked a little like a different person whenever she laughed. She grinned back at him. "I thought Chilton was going to have a coronary."

"How much trouble am I in?" he asked.

"Not much," she reassured him. "Everyone that attends has to sign a non-disclosure form. No one's allowed to talk about it, so it shouldn't get out. I have a suspicion Chilton will be bringing it up in your next session, however."

"Undoubtedly," Will said warily.

"You didn't seem to mind Hannibal, though," she said cautiously.

"Alana, it's been a long night," he said. "Can we not?"

"Of course, I'm sorry," she said, leaning against the elevator wall as the doors opened to his floor. "Goodnight, Will."

Winston was waiting for him in the entryway. Will patted him as he passed by, pulling off the jacket as he went. He headed straight for the closet, pushing off the shoes and stripping vindictively out of the restrictive waistcoat.

He was just pulling on a t-shirt instead when he heard a slight buzzing. He leaned forward, tugging Freddie's phone out from where he had stashed it in on of the hanging jackets.

She'd sent him a text: **so what alpha caught your eye at the ball**

Will stared at the text, a plan twisting through the back of his mind. Margot Verger had been wrong about his options concerning her brother. There was one solution she hadn't considered.

If someone was killing off his suitors, Mason Verger had just had himself moved to the top of the list. If it got out in the news, it would be a declaration the Ripper couldn't ignore.

So far the answers he'd given Freddie had been inconsequential little facts that had no impact on anyone's lives. If he answered this one, he was going to put someone directly in the Ripper's crosshairs. There would be no rationalizing it: it would be as good as a death sentence.

He didn't agonize over his decision nearly as much as he should have. He just typed out his response, and hit send:

Mason Verger.

Message Delivered.

Chapter End Notes

Next Up: Will is finally beginning to piece together Hannibal's connection to the Ripper, it just might be too late to do him any good. But one thing is certain: as the body count continues to rise, someone is going to have to take a fall.

time to murder and create

Chapter Notes

> Note: I was going to wait to post again until I had drafts through at least chapter nine, but then I got sick last weekend and didn't write at all, and I really don't want to lose the momentum for this story. So here you are! Come what may, I'm just gonna go where the muses take me. The characters are pretty much ignoring my outline, anyway.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mason Verger was all over the news the next day.

Freddie's report was first, of course. She had stood in front of the OPA building wearing her plaid peacoat and a knowing smirk, trying to stretch his simple text into the story of the century.

"An inside source has reported that our newest omega, Will Graham, only had eyes for Mason Verger at his Unveiling last night," Freddie told the camera unrepentantly. "As you may know, Mason Verger is the heir to the Verger fortune, and has long been considered one of the most eligible alphas in Baltimore, despite rampant rumors of his violent temper." She tossed her hair back subtlety, her smile flickering in and out. "He has been notorious for not having any relationships, and the consensus seemed to be he was saving himself for an omega per the Verger tradition. It looks like it may have been true.

I have managed to confirm with another source within the OPA that Mason has formally submitted himself as a suitor for Will Graham. Which, considering the past few weeks, is not only a bold move but a brave one. Will Verger manage to become the world's next bonded alpha? Or just the Ripper's next victim?"

Will wasn't surprised to see that Freddie knew exactly how much chaos her story was bound to cause, and was reveling in it. The other networks picked up the story with just as much gruesome delight, and like a child's game of telephone, by three o'clock that afternoon everyone was certain a marriage date had already been secretly set.

Which he assumed was why Abigail was there pounding on the door.

She was panting when he opened the door, his dogs trailing along behind her like ducklings. She narrowed her eyes at him. "Verger? Really? Did you lose your mind last night or what?"

"Abigail," he started, but she pushed past him, undeterred. He reached in his pocket, activating the jammer to give them some privacy.

"You realize he's a psychopath right?" she asked. "Luckily he never had any interest in me, but I've met Margot a few times, so I know things, okay? He's a super-creep. I mean, he's the

worst of the worst. You had a problem with *Tristan*, in the best movie ever, and he was adorable. How can you—"

"I am not going to bond with Mason Verger," he broke in to reassure her.

Abigail deflated. "Oh, thank god," she said, reaching up to press a hand to her heart. "I thought I was going to have to tell Fred to have you committed."

"Aren't we sort of already committed?" he asked.

"Well, I am," she said. "You're more just probationary committed. Meaning they'll totally still pimp you out if the occasion arises. Especially to someone like Verger, because he practically owns this place."

Will winced at her word choice, no matter how apt it was. "I don't know where that story came from," he reassured her shamelessly. "I danced with him once, not entirely by choice, so I guess that's what started it."

"Ew," Abigail said, making a face before crossing her arms and glancing back at him. "Well, who else? Did you find anyone you did actually like?"

"No," Will said, glancing away as he felt the phantom sensation of Hannibal's fingers tickling up his back. "Definitely not."

"You're hopeless," Abigail told him. "But at least your particular brand of hopeless means you haven't actually fallen for Mason Verger."

Will shook his head, glancing back at her fondly. Abigail had a kind of boundless energy and love of life that really didn't fit her past or her current circumstance. He was glad she hadn't let the things that had happened to her change who she was.

He was pretty sure he had not been so lucky.

"How have the mutts been? Not causing too much trouble, I hope?" he asked, hoping to take the attention off himself.

Abigail's eyes flickered guiltily. "Yeah, sorry I keep stealing them," she said. "They sort of just follow me home! Lucifer isn't too happy about it."

Will grinned despite himself. "I still can't believe you named your cat Lucifer."

"Trust me, it suits him," she promised.

"Well, it's fine," Will said. "They go where they're needed."

"Thank you," she said quietly, before glancing up at him. "It was so lonely, before you got here. If you find an alpha, I mean, I want you to be happy, obviously, but I—"

Will awkwardly pulled her into a hug. "Abigail, I'd be lying if I said I was planning to stay here," he said. "But you're the one good thing about this place, okay? And if I do manage to

get out someday, that doesn't mean I'm going to forget about you. I'll get you out too, if I can."

"Yeah, like they'd ever let an omega be guardian for another omega," Abigail said, as she gently pulled away. She looked reassured though, even as terrible as Will was at reassuring people. "But thanks, for saying it."

"Will!"

Will and Abigail both turned at the shout, and Matthew stopped in his tracks, not expecting to see Abigail. He blinked. "Ms. Hobbs," he said awkwardly.

"I've told you a million times, Matthew, it's Abigail," she said, though her eyes were bright as she surveyed him. Abigail glanced back at Will then, looking far too perceptive. It wasn't actually procedure for the aides to come walking into a patient's private residence, familiarly calling their names. "I suppose I should be heading back to my room."

His pack tripped over their own feet in their haste to follow her out, and slammed up against the back of her legs like a canine traffic jam when she came to an abrupt stop. Abigail looked back at him. "You know, as much as I want you to stay away from Mason, I think you and Margot should see if you can get together to talk sometime. I think you'd have a lot in common."

She gave him a little knowing grin then, and disappeared, apparently having had her faith restored in his pathetic farce of a love life.

"Great. Now she thinks we're sleeping together," Will said.

Matthew just shrugged, before dropping down on the sofa like he was a guest and not his minder. "If she does, she won't say anything, she wouldn't want us in trouble," he said. "So who cares?"

"Why were you rushing in?" Will asked.

Matthew just turned and raised an eyebrow. "Why do you think?" he asked. "You're playing a dangerous game with Mason Verger."

"I did what I could to dissuade him," Will said. "He assured me he'd just enjoy it if I stabbed him with a fork, and I'm not allowed a gun any longer, so…"

"He thinks he's already got you," Matthew insisted. "Didn't you notice how none of the other alphas came near you?"

"I figured it was fear of injury," Will said, and shrugged. "Which was sort of the point."

"You didn't make yourself out to be very inviting, I'll give you that. But they weren't just frightened of you. Mason spent the night subtlety threatening the competition until they all backed off. Only one he couldn't get to give up was Hannibal Lecter. Lecter actually left their conversation looking *amused*."

"That could be helpful, actually," Will said, brightening a bit. Once an alpha took his name off the courting list for an omega, there was no getting back on it. If Mason had gotten rid of the majority of his competition, and the Ripper got rid of *Mason*, he'd be virtually left alone.

Well, except for Hannibal.

"I don't think you understand the threat that Verger poses," Matthew said tightly. "You don't know the things he's done, or the power that he has."

Will dropped into the chair across from Matthew. "I do understand," he said simply. He knew exactly how high the stakes were. He just didn't think Mason was going to be a problem for very much longer.

"I won't let him hurt you," Matthew promised.

"I know what I'm doing," Will assured him, even though he wasn't anywhere near as confident as he tried to sound. The Ripper may or may not take the bait, and if he didn't, that would leave Will with two angry psychopaths to deal with instead of one.

Three, if you counted Matthew, and Will wasn't going to make the mistake of counting him out again.

"What did you say to Hannibal?" Will asked.

Matthew watched him warily, aware of the subject change. "I told him that trying to incinerate Verger with his eyes wasn't doing anyone much good, so maybe he should ask to cut in."

Will winced, wondering how Hannibal, who so hated rudeness, would have taken a comment like that. "And?"

"And he cut in," Matthew said. "It's not much of a story, Will. What are you so worried about?"

"Hannibal is dangerous," Will said.

"Well, yeah," Matthew said. "I figured that out in about the first three seconds. Guy's a fucking psychopath, but at least he's got manners, and you've got history. The devil you know, and all that. I thought you'd prefer him to Verger."

"I'm not going to choose Hannibal just because he's tolerable," Will said.

"Is that all that he is?" Matthew asked wryly. "Just want to know my competition."

"Matthew—" Will started warningly.

"What? We're not gonna happen? Yeah, you've made that clear," Matthew said. "But eventually you're gonna have to make a choice, because not choosing is sort of like choosing Chilton, and you're too smart for that. Personally, I'd like to think I'm the most 'tolerable' of the bunch."

"And what would we do?" Will said. "If I did choose you?"

"Not much choice in that," Matthew said. "We'd have to run." He stood up from the couch, walking casually behind him before leaning back down, right at Will's ear. "But I'd let you pick the direction."

* * * * * *

His sessions with Dr. Chilton were never welcome, but it was particularly distasteful at the moment. Will was anxious about Mason Verger, and about Matthew and Hannibal. The last thing he wanted to do was spar with Frederick, who never quite understood what game they were playing in the first place.

Chilton was wearing another expensive suit, his wing-tipped shoes crossed one over the other. He looked more like he was posing for a portrait than he did like someone meant to listen to someone else. Will figured there was a probably reason Chilton wasn't involved in private practice. He didn't seem any better with people than Will was himself.

"Alana has requested us to close any route of access Mason Verger may have to you," Chilton began, and for the first time Will was grateful that the man never bothered with the usual psychiatric staples like asking how the patient was actually doing. "But considering the current news coverage, I thought I would check if that was something you want."

"I don't want to see Mason Verger," Will replied calmly. "But I'm perfectly capable of telling him that myself."

"Verger has influence over the OPA," Chilton said mildly. "If you leave that door open, he will walk through it. I won't be able to stop him."

Will slumped on the couch, watching Chilton warily. He almost sounded helpful, but he knew better than to trust his motives. "I can't be forced into a bond," he replied. "Certainly you're not suggesting that I might be coerced, because that would be very much against the law."

"Not at all," Chilton said dryly. "But I've heard Mason Verger can be very charming."

Will snorted lightly, glancing away. He wasn't in the mood to speak in code, and there wasn't anything Chilton could tell him about Verger that he hadn't already figured out for himself.

There might be something else he could tell him, though.

"Are you a fan of the opera, Dr. Chilton?" Will asked. Using the man's title was a shameless attempt to get in his good graces, and it worked almost effortlessly. Chilton sat up a little straighter, nearly preening as he cleared his throat.

"Yes, of course," he said. "I go whenever I can."

"You were at the Met the night before Tobias Budge's murder, weren’t you?" he asked casually.

Chilton's posture straightened again, this time to tense. "We are not speaking of that murder."

"Oh, I don't care about the murder," Will explained, shrugging it off. "I'm just curious about the opera. You went with Alana, didn't you?"

"What?" Chilton asked, frowning. "No, she's not a fan."

Will wondered if he meant that she wasn't a fan of the opera, or that she wasn't a fan of *him*, but didn't ask for clarification. "Oh, I must have gotten it mixed up," he said, "I thought she had mentioned something about it."

"She was probably talking about Hannibal," Chilton shrugged. "I believe he invited her to join us, but she said she had plans."

Hannibal.

Will's hands tightened on the couch, as he fought to keep his expression expressionless. Of course Hannibal had been there. Will knew he was a fan of the opera, he had once seen the albums in a neat little stack on a shelf in his office. It made perfect sense that he would take advantage of a trip to New York to go to the Met.

Will remembered standing on the stage with the phantom form of Tobias Budge's body, so certain that the opera house was not only the stage for his death but where his killer had targeted him the night before. He knew the killer had been in attendance that night with Tobias Budge. Chilton was easily discounted—not clever enough, not one to do his own dirty work.

Hannibal Lecter could not be so easily set aside—and he'd been the one Jack had sent to *review the tapes*.

The more he thought about it, the more he fit Will's profile almost exactly:

An alpha, between 35 and 55, connection to law enforcement, medical background with extensive medical knowledge, so most likely successful in some kind of medical profession. He is organized and detailed, not a compulsion killer. He is capable of emotion, but in his killing, there is no remorse. He does not see his victims as people, they are too far below him: a sub-species, a food source, not human beings.

Still, the idea that Hannibal Lecter could be the Ripper seemed almost too outlandish to be true. Will wondered if he was projecting—he was cut off here from the investigation, there weren't very many suspects he had access to. For all he knew, Jack had already found the killer and was heading to arrest him right now.

"Will?" Chilton broke through his thoughts, frowning lightly. "How have you been sleeping at all since you've been off suppressants?"

"About as well as I ever did when I had them," he said. "I put in another request to get a prescription, but I haven't heard back."

"That's because we're worried what you've already done to your system," Chilton said. "You still haven't fully recovered from the withdrawal symptoms. Or are you going to say that

stabbing an alpha with a fork had nothing to do with withdrawal?"

Will had wondered when Chilton was going to bring that up. He'd lasted longer than he'd expected. "I was told, quite firmly, not to allow an alpha to touch me any time outside of a dance," he said. "My verbal request for him to remove his hand was ignored. I used what was at hand."

Chilton leaned back, resting one elbow on the arm of the chair, and brought his hand up to rest on his chin. "That's a new interpretation of the rule," he said. "I haven't heard that excuse before."

"What should I have done?" Will asked. "Called for help?"

"Yes, that's exactly what you should have done," Chilton said. "There were any number of guards standing by waiting to assist you. He would have been removed."

Will didn't want to examine his own actions. If he was being honest, he had never been prone to violence. He was *drawn* to violence, but that wasn't exactly the same thing. Until Trevor—well, until he picked up that gun and took a life—he had never really harmed anyone. He didn't let himself get close enough to anyone to hurt them, or to get hurt in return.

Stabbing Gregory had been instinct, and he'd *enjoyed* it.

"I'm not very good at asking for help," Will said.

"That's understandable," Chilton said. "You've taken care of yourself for a very long time, but perhaps it's time you realized your situation has changed."

Will thought about the text he had sent to Freddie, which was definitely a request for help, meant for one person in particular. Maybe he was learning to understand his situation better than Chilton knew.

"You never did say why you were scared of Hannibal," Will said, glancing back over at the doctor. "I find it strange you spend your weekends joining him at the opera, but are afraid to see him here."

"You seem to have a fascination with my off-duty hours," Chilton said. "We're supposed to be talking about you."

"I don't like talking about me," Will explained. "But you do like talking about you. Don't you think our conversations would be more pleasant this way?"

"I don't like talking about myself," Chilton said, which was a blatant lie, but one he managed to somehow say without flinching, "and I'm here to help you."

"What if I answer one of your questions, if you'll answer one of mine?" Will asked.

Chilton shifted in his seat, lifting one leg to cross it entirely over the other. He tilted his head as he watched Will carefully. "Agreed," he said. "I'll even let you go first."

"How long has Hannibal been blackmailing you?" Will asked.

Chilton went pale, though he managed to hide his worry everywhere but his eyes. "Excuse me?" he asked.

"I think that's a generous question, really," Will said. "I'm not asking for the details about what he's blackmailing you *with*. I only want a timeframe. I already know it's happening, so there's no reason to lie."

Chilton glared at him. "Since about a week before you got here," he snapped.

Will's breath caught at the admission. He had expected the answer to be *since you got here*, but this told him far more. Hannibal had been preparing for his arrival here since they *met*, not since his status was discovered. And Hannibal was still planning on using Chilton for something. The phone call had been a bonus, not the endgame, and it was an indulgence Hannibal might come to regret if he ever realized how much it had given away.

"Your turn," Will allowed, after a moment, his mind still running through the new information.

"Did your father help you hide your status as an omega?" Chilton asked, and it was almost disappointing. Will supposed he shouldn't have worried Chilton might actually ask something of note.

"No," Will answered. "I kept it from him, too."

"How did you manage to keep it from him?" he asked.

"That's another question," Will pointed out. "Are you willing to answer another of mine?"

Chilton flushed angrily, but he'd already given away his power by playing along in the first place. Will had no reason to return to the status quo when he knew how desperate Chilton was to get him to talk. "I think we're done for now," Chilton snapped, looking disgruntled as he pushed to his feet. "I do hope you reflect on your situation, and realize things will only get better once you're ready to work with me."

Chilton opened the door and waved in another of the guards. "Mr. Bentley is going to take your vitals today," he told him, before turning to leave.

"Wait," Will called after him. "Where's Ma—Mr. Brown?"

"He asked for the rest of the day off," Chilton said, frowning slightly at the question. "I assure you, Mr. Bentley is equally qualified."

Will went silent, wary of showing too much interest in one of the guards. He knew that would be a good way to get Matthew reassigned. He nodded, which was all the acknowledgement Chilton needed to leave him behind.

Will watched the aide guardedly. He was the other medical attendant, but Will had not had much contact with him. Matthew had become his primary attendant, and for the most part

had managed to shield him from having to deal with the rest of them.

Bentley made Will uncomfortable, because something was off about him. Not like something was off with *Matthew*, he wasn't a psychopath. Bentley was just condescending and self-important, and seemed to think Will was squandering his life by fighting against every restriction they tried to place on him. Honestly, as far as Will was concerned, Bentley was *worse*.

"Give me your arm," Bentley huffed, reaching out to grab it at the same time. He wasn't as gentle as Matthew, but he was just as efficient. For a moment, Will thought he might make it through the check-up without having to socialize.

Then Bentley finished and smirked up at him. "Heard you'll be leaving us soon," he said. "Good for you."

"Oh?" Will asked. "What makes you think I'm leaving?"

"Verger's already got a team of lawyers drawing up contracts," he snorted. "You're gonna be his, and then you're gonna learn your place, real quick."

Will's eyes narrowed as he watched Bentley pack away the blood pressure cuff—and he remembered holding that fork, stabbing it into the flesh of Gregory's hand, through veins and tendons until it slid straight past the bones.

It worried him that the memory made him feel better.

* * * * * *

He woke up in Wolf Trap.

He was lying on his bed, but the dogs were not on theirs. There was only one flickering light coming in through the window from the porch, and the darkness saturated everything else like a living thing. Will gasped for breath as he pulled himself up to his knees, wondering for one, blissful moment, if everything had been a bad dream.

"Can you feel it happening?"

Will spun at the voice, losing his balance and falling on his backside on the bed. Hannibal sat in chair in the corner of the room, his face half lit every other second by the flickering porch light. He looked impeccably dressed, as normal, but now he had a pair of beautiful, bloody wings curled in behind him like a cape.

Will reached back, trying to examine his own shoulder blades when he felt something pressing against his skin from the inside.

"What's happening to me?" he asked.

Hannibal watched him dispassionately, a consummate psychiatrist. "You know what you are," he said simply.

Will screamed as pain flashed down his back, falling forward to catch himself on his hands. There was a tearing sound and then his skin was ripping open, two slits straight down his back. Hollow bones slipped out through the tears like thread through a needle, unfurling behind him the moment they were clear.

He lay there gasping for a moment, and then he dared to look back.

A pair of wings stretched out behind him, the feathers looked like they had once been white, but they were so soaked in blood that now all he could see was red.

He reached out hesitantly to touch one wing, and when he pulled his hand back again it was covered in blood. He looked back towards Hannibal, only to find the man was right in front of him, his hands resting against the surface of his bed so he could lean down and meet his eyes. Hannibal's beautiful wings were open now, blocking out most of what little light was left.

"You know what I am, too," Hannibal whispered, his voice strangely seductive.

"I'm not like you," Will insisted.

"But you could be," Hannibal promised. "Can you see it yet?"

"You've been leading me," Will said, recalling a dance, a waltz that felt like a dream.

"It's time you woke up," Hannibal told him.

Will opened his eyes. He tightened his fingers around his sheets, reveling in the feel of them, solid beneath his hands. Sometimes he could not tell when he was awake. It was getting worse instead of better, and he wondered if the lack of suppressants was blurring the lines even further.

He forced himself to sit up instead of staying in bed, and turned to check the clock on his dresser to see how long he had slept in. He froze before his eyes made it halfway there—because there was a shadow on his wall in the shape of a human heart.

It hung suspended from a line, its edges drawn across the peach-colored wallpaper like a charcoal sketch. His breath caught and he went completely still, his own heart beating faster every passing second as he realized what must lay behind him.

He let out a shaky breath and turned to look at the window. A human heart hung on the other side of the glass, slowly dripping blood down to the sidewalk below. It was suspended by a small steel harpoon right through its center, attached to a thick red cord that disappeared up beyond the top of the window. There was a note tied just above it to the line with a bow.

He slowly got to his feet and approached it. As he got closer he could see that the note was penned in blood: the style a beautiful, classic calligraphy. He suspected it was stenciled and not hand-drawn, and therefore untraceable by any kind of graphology.

Its message was simple, and damning:

As requested

Will had no doubt in his mind that it belonged to Mason Verger. Delivered to him with a mocking flair by someone that knew very well he hadn't actually wanted to possess the man's heart. It was both a taunt and a gift, by someone that knew Will had been manipulating them into going after Mason, but had decided to oblige him anyway.

Which meant it was someone that had been at the ball. Just like it was someone that had been at the opera where Tobias was killed, just like it was someone that knew Will before he was found out.

He reached out and laid his hand against the glass. He imagined he could feel the phantom heartbeats vibrating through it from the other side, and the heart seemed to move as he watched it, the disconnected valves trying valiantly to reconnect.

It was an elegant display, and so clever. Will was so isolated here, kept away from the details of the outside world. Yet here was a message he could not miss, delivered right to his bedroom while he slept.

He should have been terrified that the Ripper had been so close. He should have been disgusted that his manipulations had played a part in bringing this about.

Instead he just closed his eyes and let the world spin back. He could feel time unwinding, the rope tugging the heart upwards and placing it back in an open chest, where graceful, practiced hands worked with a scalpel to take it all back apart. He could see exactly where the connections of that still beating heart had been sliced, before it was carefully lifted out.

Will opened his eyes again, faced once more with the gruesome display. He could not get any more from it. He would need a body, or a crime scene, to try and recreate exactly how Mason Verger had died. But he could speculate: and he suspected that whatever had been done to Tobias Budge had been done to Mason Verger, along with something worse.

And he couldn't pretend he didn't know who was behind it, not anymore.

"Hannibal," he whispered, as certain as if the note had been signed.

Because of course it was Hannibal. It had always been Hannibal. His subconscious had known it for awhile now, and probably the rest of him, too, though Will had been reluctant to confirm the connection beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Will pulled his hand back from the glass, shuddering as the realization shot through him. This was all down to Hannibal. He stole the Alphamiticin from Olsson, then came to his home to make sure he made it to Morton's house to discover it. He got to play the part of hero in carrying him out of the house, setting up a courtship in front of the whole world.

He had set him up quite thoroughly. Hannibal had known if he simply confronted Will, he would have run. If he'd just gone and turned him in, he'd never have been forgiven.

"Son of a bitch," Will whispered.

The worst part was that there wasn't much he could do about it. Jack wouldn't believe him blindly, not without any evidence, and he couldn't get any while he was locked up in here. He wasn't even certain any evidence *existed*. Hannibal was too careful, too thorough. Whatever loose ends they thought they'd discovered in the Ripper case were almost certainly going to lead them to someone else.

Hannibal had to have known he would figure it out. He had practically been taunting him with the truth, and he wasn't like other serial killers. This wasn't a plea for help, and this wasn't meant to get him caught. Which meant he thought either Will wasn't capable of bringing him to justice, or he thought he wouldn't even try.

He would be lying if said the thought hadn't occurred to him. Hannibal was like an open flame, and Will had been drawn to him, much to his own detriment, since the very start.

Will could too easily get lost inside of Hannibal's head. He could too easily admire his work, *emphasize with it*. It's what Hannibal had to be counting on. But that meant he also knew every little dirty trick that Hannibal had been using *against him*.

Step one had to be isolate and contain him. He'd been stored away to become a captive audience for his performances. Hannibal had waited as his entire support network was taken apart. First Jack, cut off from any access after a single visit. Then Alana, cut off by her own professional barriers and Will's reluctance to be what she wanted him to be.

And Hannibal, too. After all, absence makes the heart grow fonder.

It was why their encounter at the opera house had caught Hannibal so off guard. He'd had a *schedule*—their first reunion was meant to be at the ball. All along he was making moves behind the scenes, eliminating the competition at the same time he was leaving breadcrumbs for Will to follow back to the truth.

For his last move, he'd offer Will a way out of this place.

Will heard a commotion and leaned forward, noticing people beginning to crowd around outside, pointing up at the heart in horror.

It was only a moment later and the sirens started up, their cries rising like a chorus as they quickly grew closer.

* * * * * *

Will had been dragged from his bedroom by one of the aides, and then sequestered in his library. They bundled him up in a blanket and pushed him down to sit on the couch. People hovered around him like he was a traumatized child and not a full-grown man that used to visit crime scenes for a living. He supposed they were waiting for him to break down.

But the sight of the heart didn't bother him. The fact that he knew it was Mason Verger's bothered him even less.

What he could not stop thinking of was *Hannibal Lecter*.

This was the moment of revelation that inevitably happened during the course of a case. He would be looking at suspect files or reading some insignificant report and it would just hit him, and suddenly he'd know who they were looking for. He could tell Jack exactly where to find their killer, and he wasn't ever wrong.

He also knew his limitations. He hadn't told Jack when he figured out their killer was Trevor Morton and not the other two suspects, and that was because he couldn't justify it. He *knew*, but couldn't give Jack the evidence he would need.

On paper, Hannibal matched the profile, but he had involved himself so thoroughly with the case and with Jack that no one was going to want to believe they had been taken in by him. He'd need a mountain of evidence to just get them to listen, and Hannibal hadn't left any behind.

So when Beverly Katz showed up to question him, he did not rush up to her and say: *It's Hannibal, he did it.* He was not entirely certain what stopped him, but he knew this would require careful handling.

"Will," Bev greeted, her lips quirking up into a crooked grin as she came to a stop in front of him. "Good to see you conscious. You scared the shit out of me, you know."

He looked up at her gratefully. She was the first one not to fawn all over him and ask how he was coping. He was glad to see at least one colleague hadn't magically forgotten the last few years. "Yeah?" he asked. "Nice of you to visit. Suspicious timing, though."

She laughed. "Do you know how long it took me to get cleared by the OPA?" she asked. "Honestly, if you hadn't had a heart dangling outside your window like the world's most fucked up valentine, I'd probably still be trying to get permission to come say hi. As it is, they searched me before they'd let me in. I guess they think I'm going to slip you crime scene photos like Jack."

"Are you?" he asked.

"I was very thoroughly searched," she said dryly, before glancing behind her. "I did manage to bring you this, though." She pulled a small bottle of whiskey from her pocket and tossed it to him.

He fumbled it, but managed to hold on. "Didn't they tell you I'm not allowed alcohol?"

"Screw that," Bev said. "Now that you're living in the Stepford mansion, I figured you'd need a buzz to stay sane."

"If you were searched, how did you manage to get this past them?" he asked.

"There's a reason I got the travel size," Bev said, raising an eyebrow.

Will looked at the bottle suspiciously, holding it carefully by the neck. "Uh…"

"What? It's fine," she said. "I just stashed it in my boobs while they searched me! They almost never check there." She crossed her arms then, and watched him carefully. "We do

sort of have to talk about the elephant in the room, though."

Will nodded, and hid the small bottle in his pocket. "Did you find the rest of his body?" he asked.

"No, but we're sure it's Verger," Bev said. "He went missing yesterday afternoon. DNA is already confirmed. Don't imagine he's walking around without a heart, though if anyone could manage it—"

"You knew him then?" Will asked.

"We've had calls out to the Verger estate before," Bev explained. "Anything to do with an omega gets the full attention of the FBI, and there have been more than a few tips called in regarding the treatment of Margot Verger. We could never find anything, though. And she swears he never touched her."

Beverly moved to sit down on the low table in front of the couch, making it so Will had to look down instead of up. Beverly, he remembered, had always been strangely deft at handling victims. On the surface she was a terrible choice for anything that required careful handling: she said what she thought and wasn't afraid to speak her mind, and she was far from politically correct. Jack kept her away from victims when he could, and shut her up in the lab.

But she was able to speak to people on their level, instinctually relating to them. Chilton could learn a few things from her.

"Jack wanted to come, but, you know, he can't get in without a an OPA approved chaperone, and Dr. Bloom is still pretty ticked at him. But he told me you said that Olsson's murder was a love letter," Beverly said calmly. "If that was a love letter, what the hell is this? Is this even the Ripper?"

"Yes," Will said, but he knew this wasn't a love letter. This was a favor. He swallowed, and let his eyes wander back to the bedroom. "This was a gift."

"Is he going off the rails?" Bev asked. "Because he's getting reckless, and that's the one thing the Ripper never is. We've got a lead on the cage he bought for Olsson, and there's evidence he was with Tobias Budge the night of the opera. Jack's got a pretty short suspect list, and he thinks he's closing in."

"What suspects?" Will asked, glancing at her in surprise. It was strange to think that the investigation was continuing without him, that they would be piecing things together on their own, though he knew that of course they would. As valuable as Jack claimed his services were, crimes were solved without his input all the time.

Beverly winced. "I can't talk about that, okay?" she said. "You're not cleared for the details of an ongoing case. Jack's high enough on the food chain he can push that boundary, but if I do it, I'll find myself in the unemployment line."

Will was annoyed, but not by Beverly. She had a job to do, and he understood that. He nodded vaguely, though his mind was spinning, trying to figure out if Jack might already

suspect Hannibal.

"What I can talk about, if you're willing, is *this case*," Bev said, nudging him subtlety. "Nothing about it looks like a traditional Ripper killing. Usually he leaves behind a body and keeps an organ or two, not the other way around. Except, who else could it be? How many murderous alpha stalkers could you have?"

"I'm starting to lose count," Will said dryly.

Bev laughed, obviously thinking it was a joke. Will let her. "Right, so why the switch in M.O.?"

"I don't think the Ripper *has* an M.O.," he told her. "At least, not in the traditional sense."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"He's not a compulsion killer. He doesn't kill because he has to, it's not a ritual. It's a … pastime," Will explained.

"That is one seriously fucked up pastime," she said wryly.

"But this was different," Will insisted. "He was angry, and you're right that he's getting reckless. That never happens, so Mason must have really pissed him off. Maybe there wasn't enough left of the body to display."

"Huh," Bev said, eyes widening. "Okay, that makes sense. Crazy psychopath sense, but that's what we keep you around for."

Will let out a strained laugh, leaning back into the couch. "Well, not anymore," he pointed out.

Beverly deflated a little, hunching over with her elbows rested on her knees. "I'm sorry about what happened," she said. "I'm guessing you never wanted this."

"No," Will said wryly. "I spent my life avoiding it."

"And yet you still worked with us," she pointed out.

He looked at her warily. "What?" he asked.

"You did you best to cut yourself off from society, right?" Bev asked. "Except FBI profiler isn't exactly a low-key job, but you were helping people, even though it put yourself at risk. You don't know how much I respect that."

He wished he could be the way Beverly saw him—someone risking discovery out of a sense of duty and obligation. It was even partly true.

But mostly he'd caught killers because he wasn't able to do anything else. If he looked at a crime scene, he could recreate it. It wasn't something he could turn off. Just like when he

woke up to that impaled heart, and he'd known, just *known*, that Hannibal had been the one that had hung it there for him to see.

"Beverley," Will started, years of ingrained procedure telling him to *tell her*. If nothing else, he wanted her warned. He didn't want one of the only people that had treated him like an actual friend to end up one of the Ripper's next victims.

Except telling her might be the very thing to lead her there.

"Will, what is it?" she prompted.

"Nothing," he said, after a moment. "Just promise me you'll be careful."

"What, me?" she asked, tossing him a rakish grin. "I'm not the one that made the Ripper's Christmas card list."

"He won't hurt me," Will said. "At least, not physically."

"You sure of that?" she asked, her expression going serious.

"I'm really not," he admitted.

"Well," Bev decided, "that's what the whiskey's for."

* * * * * *

Will didn't actually drink the whiskey, though he did hide it away with the cell phone just in case. The last thing he wanted at the moment was to dull his mind. He had an opponent that definitely wasn't going to be letting anything distract *him*.

It was frustrating that he couldn't confront Hannibal. He was pretty sure Hannibal would admit it to him, even if he would do it in a way that wouldn't prove anything to anyone else. As it was, he was in the dark. He didn't know what suspects Jack had, and he didn't know what Hannibal was doing about it. If Hannibal was still involved in the investigation, he would be leading Jack away from the truth.

He considered texting Freddie for information, but decided it was too risky. Whatever else she was, Freddie was smart. She might read between the lines of any questions he asked, and if she got wind of the idea that Hannibal could be the Ripper, things could get completely out of hand. Luckily her latest questions hadn't been too invasive. Before Mason's death, she just wanted to know if he'd seen him again since the ball. After his death, she just wanted to confirm which part of him had been hung outside his window.

But without being able to use Freddie as a source, his only other option was to go on the internet on his stolen phone, searching for stories that might give him information. It turned out the only story running was Mason Verger's sudden murder. There were lots of tearful pictures of Margot Verger, looking like a movie star as she stood on the steps on her mansion, addressing the public. She would have inherited the entire estate, thanks to the omega protection laws that gave omegas everything in the event of their caretaker's death.

And since she wasn't under guardianship by the OPA, she could actually do something with it. Will hoped she did. He was fairly certain, based on their single conversation, that the tears she was shedding for her brother were only for show.

Still, as happy as he was Margot was free from her brother, he wasn't actually able to find anything useful online. To make his isolation worse, he hadn't seen Matthew since the previous morning.

The fact that he hadn't shown up to check on him after Verger's murder worried him. He considered confiding in Matthew about the cell phone the next time he saw him, so he'd have a way to reach him if something like this happened again. As it was, he couldn't even ask any of the other guards where Matthew had gone, because he couldn't risk drawing attention to their relationship.

There was also the worry that Hannibal knew about Matthew, and may have figured out that he was a much higher risk to his plans than Verger could have ever been.

If only Will knew what those plans *were*.

Hannibal wasn't as careless as these last murders made the Ripper seem. He was leading them somewhere, and they were all just following right along behind him.

Winston nudged up against him, but Will didn't look up from the phone. He was hiding beside the mostly empty shoe rack in the large closet, which was the only place aside from the bathroom that felt remotely private. Winston usually followed him there, so Will just distractedly reached out to pet him.

He pulled his hand back covered in blood.

He stared at for a moment, not sure if he was dreaming, and then dropped the phone and surged up to his knees, checking Winston over frantically. But the blood didn't seem to be his.

One of his ears and the side of his nose was covered it in, as were his paws. He stepped out of the closet and found a bloody trail of half-formed paw prints leading back to the door.

"Stay here, Winston," he ordered, before following the trail.

The paw prints led to a pinstriped blazer dropped beside the couch. It was soaked in blood, and he could see it leaking out around the sides, tendrils of blood flowing out to saturate the carpet.

"They're going to be coming for me."

Will spun at the voice, and Chilton was standing a few feet from the apartment door. His white dress shirt was covered in blood along one side, and he was holding a large knife so tightly his knuckles were bloodless and white.

"Chilton," Will said warily, stepping back.

"Will," Chilton said desperately, stepping closer. "You have to help me!"

"What have you done?" Will asked, moving back until he hit the wall.

"I haven't done anything, but they're dead," Chilton said, his voice going higher. "They're all dead! I just…I woke up at my desk, and they were…"

"Who's dead?" Will demanded, his heart hammering as he worried for Matthew.

"One of the guards, and a couple FBI agents," Chilton said dismissively, as he anxiously looked back towards the door. "Oh, god."

"What guard, Chilton?" Will demanded tightly.

"Bentley," he said impatiently, as though he couldn't understand what difference it made.

Will let out a breath in relief that it wasn't Matthew—and if he was being honest, if it had to be someone here, Bentley would have been his first choice.

"They're coming to arrest me, do you understand?" Chilton demanded. "Oh, god. What am I going to do?"

"Well, you don't want them to find you alone with an omega holding that knife, for a start," Will advised.

Chilton looked down at his hand, and then abruptly dropped the knife, before reaching up to place the palms of his hands at his temples. "Oh god," he said again.

"Why would you come to me?" Will asked in disbelief.

Chilton lowered his hands, turning to look at Will. "Because you're the only one that sees what he is."

Hannibal, Will realized. Of course it was Hannibal—*this* was his plan. He'd been setting up Frederick Chilton to take the fall for him. If Will examined the situation from an unbiased view, Chilton certainly fit the profile, except for one of the most vital parts: he was a beta, not an alpha.

But Will himself had gone on the record with Jack in the past, calling Chilton a beta with delusions of alpha.

Someone that thought of themselves as an alpha, but wasn't, could just as easily slip into the profile in Hannibal's place.

"What happened?" Will asked.

Chilton ran a hand through his hair, seemingly not noticing that he was just further covering himself in the blood that coated him like a veil. "Hannibal was coming to visit, he said he was going to help me," he said. "I didn't want anyone to know he was here, so I shut down all the lobby cameras and had Bentley escort him to my office. Next thing I know he's snapping Bentley's neck and he's got me in a chokehold! I wake up….I wake up, and I'm covered in blood, and there are bodies everywhere."

Chilton was leaving something out. Hannibal had been coming to speak about whatever he was blackmailing him with, and he had known Chilton would cover his tracks so no one would see Hannibal there. "You need to tell me what he has on you," Will said.

"What does it matter?" Chilton snarled, glaring over at Will. "Just tell them it wasn't me!"

Will didn't get a chance to respond before the door crashed open and a number of FBI agents swarmed in, lead by Jack. They were wearing bulletproof vests and looked ready for anything: Will was glad Chilton dropped the knife, or he might not have been given the chance to surrender.

"Down on the ground," Jack snarled.

Chilton dropped to his knees at once, his hands going up on instinct. But his eyes stayed trained on Will. "It isn't me, you have to tell them," he insisted. "I didn't do this."

"I know you didn't," Will said.

"Then help me!" Chilton cried, as the agents roughly grabbed his wrists to twist them behind his back and cuff them together.

Will ignored Jack's warning look and took a step closer, to meet Chilton in the eyes. One of the other agents intercepted him before he got far, taking his arm in a firm grip to keep him back, but he ignored them.

"What exactly do you expect me to do about it?" Will asked him. "I'm just a helpless omega. I can't be thinking about things like this."

Chilton looked at him in disbelief as he was dragged back to his feet, but Will felt very little sympathy as he repeated the man's favorite refrain: "It's not good for my therapy."

Chapter End Notes

Next Up: Chilton is charged with the crimes of the Chesapeake Ripper, even as Will confides his suspicions about Hannibal to Jack. Dismissed by his former boss and increasingly worried for the missing Matthew Brown, Will plans a trap to catch Hannibal Lecter on his own.

through darkness for to wade

Chapter Notes

> Note: So you may have noticed the chapter count jumped from 10 to 11! This chapter was getting so long that I had to split it into 2, even though my OCD wants it to be an even 10 *so much*. As such, I'm calling this chapter "8A" and the next chapter "8B," so really there will still be 10 chapters total. Sort of. Hopefully no more letters will be involved (okay, so there is like a 40% chance I may have to split chapter 10 into two parts, and by 40% I mean 80%).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will had barely managed to slip back in his bedroom and grab his phone off the floor, under the guise of grabbing a sweater, before they whisked him away to Abigail's floor. They weren't letting him take Winston until the blood on his fur was processed as evidence, but Beverly had promised she would take care of him personally and bring him up as soon as she was done.

Then he and Abigail were both told they were confined to her private residence until they could get someone from the OPA to come manage the situation. In addition to the OPA guards, there were at least five FBI agents watching the doors and blocking the elevator. So Will was feeling even more confined than usual.

At least Abigail was having the time of her life.

"I can't believe Fred is the *Ripper*," she cried, excitedly pressing herself up against her window to try and get a glimpse of the crowds outside. "I knew there was something different about him, but I just figured he was into something kinky after hours. You know, like maybe he liked whips and chains in the bedroom or something, not that I'm judging, of course, it's just that—"

"Abigail, please," Will interrupted quickly. "I really don't need that visual."

"Right, sorry," she said, though she was still grinning. "Who do you think they're gonna replace him with? I guess we should be thankful Verger's dead. He'd probably push for someone old school to come in and marry us off."

Will actually hadn't even had time to worry about who Chilton's replacement might be yet, but it wasn't something he could put off for long. There was more than a small part of him that was spitefully gleeful at Chilton's present situation, but he knew he couldn't afford to let it go on. He'd kept the truth from Beverly before because he thought he'd be able to handle it on his own, but he hadn't expected Hannibal to make another move so quickly.

Setting up Chilton simultaneously put Hannibal in the clear and got rid of one of the last barriers between Will and the alphas wanting to court him.

And then there was Matthew.

No one that he had discreetly asked had heard from Matthew since before Mason's heart was discovered. He even overheard one of the guards being questioned by Jack before he'd been pulled away, and he'd mentioned that Matthew hadn't showed up or called in for his last two shifts.

If he'd gone after Hannibal, or had gotten in his way…

Will cursed, scrubbing his hands through his hair as paced across Abigail's library—a library that was, quite frankly, even more atrocious than his own. It was filled with innumerable Young Adult trilogies that didn't bear closer examination.

"Are you okay?" Abigail asked him. "You're looking a little pale."

"I'm fine," he assured her. "Are they just going to leave us here?"

"I've been on lockdown before, it's not a great time," Abigail admitted, as she threw herself onto one of the plush reading chairs. "I'm pretty sure it's like being in solitary in prison. You know, if the prison was a five star hotel instead of a prison." She paused to think about that. "And we were actually alone. But they'll have to get someone in to replace Fred soon, right?"

"Yes, you're right," Will agreed. The public would be scrambling for any news about what had happened. Leaving an OPA facility with two resident omegas without any management for anything more than a few hours would get them crucified in the media. But the fact that they were likely to assign someone hastily wasn't as reassuring as he'd like.

The doors opened before he could dwell on it too much, and Winston came rushing in. He'd been scrubbed cleaned, and Will quickly dropped down to greet him. He was grateful Winston didn't seem to be overly traumatized by what had happened—the worst part for him had probably been the bath.

When he glanced up Jack and Beverly were both approaching. Beverly gave him a weak grin and a small wave, but Jack didn't look to be in the mood. Winston was surrounded by the rest of the pack as they came to check on him, so Will pushed himself back to his feet.

"What have you found out?" Will asked.

Jack glanced at Abigail for a moment, before giving Beverly a significant glance. Beverly stepped forward quickly. "Hey, Abigail," she said. "This library is amazing! Are these books all yours?"

"Let's go outside," Jack said.

Will followed Jack out into the large room beyond Abigail's rooms. The layout matched his own almost exactly, though Abigail's had a little more pink. The color reminded him of Pepto-Bismol, but she'd assured him it was at her request. "Have you talked to Chilton?"

"I had him taken to the nearest facility for booking and holding, but he didn't stop talking the whole way to the transport," Jack sighed, as he reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose. "I can't believe he was right in front of us the whole time."

"He has been," Will agreed. "But it's not Chilton."

Jack dropped his hand and looked at him incredulously. "All the evidence says that it is. Also, we literally caught him red-handed. I remember. You were there."

"You found what you were supposed to," he countered.

"You said it was someone involved with the case, you told me that," Jack snapped. "As the head psychiatrist with the OPA he was fully briefed on all the violent crimes that could pose a risk to omegas. That included both the Ripper and Morton. He's the one that insisted we go back to search Morton's house thoroughly."

"You would have done that anyway," Will insisted.

"But I wouldn't have called you in," Jack pointed out. "He told me to have all hands on deck. I have enough to tie him to at least two of the murders, not even counting my two agents or the OPA guard being loaded up for the morgue downstairs. We caught him on video having an argument with Budge at the opera the night he was killed. We also have records that Olsson's OPA expense account was used to purchase that birdcage you had us trace, only thing is, the transaction was after Olsson's time of death. Guess who was the only other person that had access to it? It took us awhile, but last night we finally got a warrant and confirmed Chilton's personal laptop was used for the purchase. The agents he killed were here to bring him in."

Jack sighed as he watched Will absorb the information. "Look, I know this is a lot to take in, but we can also prove that Chilton was the one that put in the request for the Alphamiticin," he added gently.

"You said Olsson took the Alphamiticin," Will said in surprise. It was the first piece of evidence he wasn't already expecting.

"No, I said Olsson was the one that reported it missing," Jack said tiredly. "After a little more digging about why it would have been in a facility like this in the first place, we finally traced the initial requisition back to Chilton. We're still not sure how he found out about you, but he requested it the morning after Morton was killed. I can only assume he must have figured out why Morton would have spared you a hell of a lot quicker than the rest of us."

Will frowned as he took that in. Was the requisition of the Alphamiticin the result of the blackmail, or the thing that Hannibal had been blackmailing him *with*? It was true Will could not see Chilton as a killer, but he could see him letting someone else get killed to save himself. Had Olsson been a fall guy for something Chilton had done? Was it just a way for Hannibal to keep Chilton under his thumb and complicit, while behind the scenes he wound the web around him even tighter?

Jack seemed to take his reflective silence as agreement, before adding his final damning point. "And that's not even touching on the fact that he fits your profile to a T."

"He doesn't fit the profile, he's a beta," Will countered, frowning as he reviewed the evidence. Hannibal's manipulations went deeper than even he suspected, but then, so did Chilton's. "The Ripper's an alpha. I know he is. I've told you that since day one."

"You've also told me there's almost always one thing you'll get wrong. So your profile was wrong about him being an alpha. Who cares? You were right about everything else," he assured him. "And what did you used to say about Chilton? Didn't you call him a wannabe alpha?"

"I'm telling you, it isn't him," Will said firmly. "I need you to listen to me, Jack. You can't trust the evidence, because it's only telling you what it's *supposed* to tell you. You think someone as hard to catch and as meticulous as the Chesapeake Ripper would screw up this badly now? This has all been orchestrated from the start. Chilton's capture is the crescendo to a very complicated symphony."

"Okay, I'll bite," Jack said. "If the Ripper isn't Chilton, who is it?"

Will couldn't put it off any longer, so he pushed down that tiny part of him that felt this was some kind of betrayal and spoke: "Hannibal Lecter."

Jack didn't react quite like he expected, instead, he just laughed. "You can't be serious."

"This isn't a joke," Will insisted. "I know it's him. He's been behind all of this, and you're thinking about it all wrong. This didn't start when Morton was killed, it started when I met Hannibal the next day!"

"I can't believe you're trying this with me, too," Jack said, his smile disappearing. "I thought Hannibal was a friend of yours."

"Too?" Will asked, latching onto the word.

"Chilton is claiming he's innocent," Jack said. "He says Hannibal is behind everything. That he found out Chilton had lost the Alphamiticin canisters, and Hannibal offered to help him 'make it go away.' Then Olsson ended up dead and blamed for the theft, and he was too terrified to confront Hannibal or risk getting himself into trouble."

That was another piece of the puzzle, but Will suspected Chilton was still holding something back to make himself look better. "And you don't believe him?"

"It's fantasy, Will. If this was a set up, it's airtight," Jack snapped. "Hannibal was with me the night Verger went missing. He came back with the team to work on the Ripper's profile. Even if I lost track of him a few times, he could never have made it all the way to Baltimore and back. Hannibal couldn't have killed Verger—and you said it yourself, Verger is the Ripper's work."

"How accurate can time of death be when you only have a severed heart to work with?" he demanded.

"Forget time of death, we have Verger's disappearance narrowed down within an hour based on his sister's testimony," Jack said. "And Hannibal was with me."

"What if Verger came to him?" Will asked.

"Jesus, Will, you're grasping at straws," Jack snapped. "Did Chilton sell you on this idea? Is that what this? What did he say to you?"

"Just listen to me," Will insisted. "Verger wasn't happy with Hannibal. If Hannibal issued a challenge, Verger may have delivered himself to his own murder. If it took place here, Hannibal wouldn't have had to be gone long."

"There's no record of Verger coming here," Jack said patiently. "He had a private limo and a dozen bodyguards. He would have brought them."

"Not if he didn't want his trip known," he said. "He could have come here intending to kill Hannibal. Maybe Hannibal didn't even plan it to work out so well, maybe he just got lucky."

"Luck is tricky as hell to prove," Jack snapped. "I need something concrete."

"Then get me out of here, and I'll find it," he promised.

"You know I can't," Jack said. "Only reason I even managed to get myself in here this time is your life was at risk and they weren't taking chances. Now the whole place is on lock down. Doesn't matter who they get to come run this place, they won't let you near this."

Will bit down on another protest. He knew Jack was right. Even if he had believed Will, there was no way he'd be able to get the OPA to allow him to assist on the case. He was going to have to make his peace with not being part of the official investigation, but the thought of who was still involved worried him.

"Is Hannibal still assisting on the case?" he asked.

"Yes," Jack said. "And I don't see any reason to kick him off. I'm not going to ruin a man's career over some serial killer's word."

Will gave him a dark look, because Jack had conveniently left out that it was on *his* word, too. Jack deflated, stepping closer to awkwardly place a hand on his shoulder. "Look, everyone gets something wrong sometimes. Sometimes it's hardest to see what's right in front of us."

Will shook off Jack's hand, and stepped away. "I'll remember that if you will."

* * * * * *

Will and Abigail were left mostly alone for the better part of the next four hours, and then Alana finally came to check on them. She didn't look quite as put together as usual. Her eyes

had dark crescent moons beneath them and her hair looked as though it had been hastily pulled back to hide the fact that it was looking a little limp. He knew she had been working closely with Chilton and the OPA, and he wondered if she'd even slept since Verger's murder.

"How are you guys holding up?" she asked, with a poor attempt at a smile.

"I'm trying to convince Will to watch the *Midnight* trilogy," Abigail told her. "But so far he hasn't given in." Then she crossed her arms, narrowing her eyes at Alana. "So it's you then, huh?"

Will turned back to Alana in surprise, wondering how out of it he was that Abigail figured it out so much faster than him. Then again, Abigail liked to put on a show, but she was always figuring things out much quicker than she'd let anyone see. He thought she would have made a wonderful profiler herself, if they'd been born into a different world.

"I've been made the Interim Director," Alana agreed tiredly. "They'd like me to take the position permanently, but I'm not sure how good of an idea that is. I'm really too close to you both."

He knew what she wasn't saying: she didn't want to be the 'bad guy,' the one confining them here. She wanted to be the confidant, the one they could *trust*. She shouldn't have worried. He and Abigail were both insightful enough to understand she was complicit even before it became official. The new title really made very little difference.

"Well, you're certainly an upgrade from Fred," Abigail told her. "Congratulations, I guess."

"Abigail, we're moving Will to another floor, would you mind if I borrowed him?" she asked. "You should probably try to get some sleep, anyway. It's getting late."

"Sure," she said. "Or I'll just sit here, and watch *Midnight* by myself."

Alana just gave her a rueful glance, before turning to Will. "We're moving you to the fifteenth floor," she said. "We already moved your things. You want to round up the pack?"

"Most of them prefer Abigail," he said wryly, before giving a low whistle. Winston came rushing towards him. "It'll just be me and Winston."

The elevator ride was awkward, but thankfully short. It opened up into another room just exactly like the one he'd been assigned before. He had hoped for something to be slightly different, but really he couldn't spot a single thing out of place.

"I've had them give you access to Abigail's floor," Alana told him. "You can go up and visit her whenever you like."

He knew it was a concession, but if she expected him to be grateful about it, she was in for a surprise. "I guess that means I still can't go home?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, Will," she said. "You are still a ward of the OPA."

"Just a different warden, right?" he snapped, pacing away down the marbled floor of the entranceway before turning back to face her. "You could reverse that decision."

"You know I can't," she said, watching him sadly. "Apart from anything else, it wouldn't be ethical. I'm too close to you, I can't trust myself to make proper decisions regarding your state of mind. I need to find an impartial psychiatrist to assess you."

"No one is impartial about omegas," he said.

"Even if I thought it was a good idea, if I tried to release you, I'd be immediately replaced. They aren't going to let you leave here." She bit her lip for a moment, before looking back up. "And to be honest, considering this thing with Hannibal, I'm not sure it's in your best interest to be on your own right now."

"Jack told you about that?" Will asked.

"It came up," she admitted. "I was present for Chilton's assessment. That's why I took so long to get here. They wanted someone from the OPA to monitor the situation."

"Then you heard what he said?" he demanded. "Do you really think it's a coincidence that we're both saying it's Hannibal?"

"I don't think it's a coincidence, no," she agreed. "I think Chilton has been using some kind of psychic driving technique on you during your therapy, to make you an ally. Psychic driving is —"

"I know what psychic driving is, Alana," Will interrupted angrily. It was essentially the same explanation Jack had arrived at as well. They thought Chilton had manipulated him through their sessions to turn him against Hannibal and to believe in a conspiracy they didn't think existed.

"You were vulnerable when you got here, and he used you to set up an alibi, just in case," she told him gently. "If he got caught, he'd have you backing him up on his fall guy. Only he picked the wrong fall guy, because he had an airtight alibi of his own."

Alana and Jack were both convinced that he'd been compromised, and anything he did to try to make them see the truth would inevitably be used against him. Because anything he said to the contrary would just further prove their point, and make him sound even crazier.

Will knew he wasn't going to get anywhere with Alana. He needed to go straight to the source.

"Is Hannibal still on the list of alphas that would like to court me?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes," Alana said, looking startled. "After this, I think it would be best if I asked him to remove himself. You're in no state to—"

"I'd like you to arrange a date," Will broke in easily. "I realize we'll need to be watched, but I want our conversation to be private. I'm allowed to ask for that. I read up on the fine print regarding my rights here. Chilton didn't bother to honor them, but I'm trusting that you will."

"Of course," she said quickly. "But, Hannibal? Will, you just admitted you think he's a serial killer."

"And you just told me he wasn't," he pointed out. "So what are you worried about?"

"I'm worried about your motives," she said warily. She was watching him carefully. But for someone who could understand people so well, she had never been very good at reading him.

"If he's really innocent, I'd just like to hear it from him, so we can all put this behind us," he told her calmly. "I don't think that's too much to ask. If he no longer wishes to see me, I won't ask again."

"I'll speak to him," she said, in a way that meant she would be insisting to Hannibal it was a bad idea. It won't matter that she would try to talk him out of it in the end. He knew Hannibal wouldn't turn down a chance to see him.

"Oh, and before I forget," she added. "I managed to get your phone back." She pulled his phone out from her purse and held it out to him, her thumb pressed against the glass screen.

"Will?" she prompted, when he just stared at it instead of reaching out.

He carefully took it from her, holding it by the edges before dropping it on the desk and crossing his arms. "Thanks."

She frowned at his reaction, pursing her lips. "Will, I really do want you to be happy here," she said. "Is there anything else I can bring you?"

Will tapped down on his first instinct to brush her off, probably with some scathing comment, and honestly thought about the question. He knew he wouldn't ever be happy here, but that didn't mean there weren't things he might need.

He thought about that one pair of dress shoes he'd been given by Chilton. He didn't have a single pair of decent shoes, and he wouldn't get very far in just his socks.

"Some running shoes," he said, after a moment. "I think I'll take up running around the entryway after all."

* * * * * *

The date with Hannibal didn't take long to arrange. Alana reluctantly admitted that Hannibal had accepted his offer the next morning, and would be coming for dinner at 6:00. She had a dining table set up in one of the empty rooms. The wall facing the entryway was entirely set with glass so the guards could keep an eye on them, but true to her word, she promised they wouldn't be eavesdropped on.

And if she hadn't been true to her word, Will was hedging his bets by bringing his jammer along with him.

He put on a crumbled blue plaid dress shirt and a pair of jeans, refusing to dress to impress him. Hannibal had known what he was getting with him from the moment they met, and if

he'd expected to end up with someone refined and well behaved he'd made a grave mistake.

But when he opened the door to find Hannibal, right at 6:00 on the dot, it seemed he had anticipated Will's little act of rebellion. He was dressed as casual as Will had ever seen him, wearing just a powder blue dress shirt with three buttons open at the collar, and a pair of dark grey slacks. He was also holding what appeared to be a picnic basket. Will stepped back on instinct, making sure Hannibal had room to enter without having to touch.

"Will," Hannibal greeted warmly. "I must say I was surprised by your invitation. I wasn't expecting to hear from you so soon."

Three guards were milling about at various points, but were discreetly pretending not to watch. He didn't recognize any of them as the guards that had worked under Chilton. Will wondered if Alana had already cleaned house.

"I brought dinner," Hannibal continued when Will said nothing in return. "Alana told me the kitchen would be happy to prepare something, but I insisted. I know you're fond of my cooking."

The thought made him slightly nauseous. He watched Hannibal, wondering if he should go ahead and lay his cards on the table, or continue the charade. "The dining room is this way," he said. He led the way back to the glass room, staring at the delicate china set that had been laid out. Will didn't know when it had been done.

Hannibal lifted lidded dishes from his basket, pre-prepared, and set one atop Will's plate. He watched with unease as the lid was removed to reveal a small helping of tri-colored potatoes, along with broccoli and a delicate pinkish-white slab of meat.

"You look nervous, Will," Hannibal said from beside him. He had taken a wine bottle from his basket and was pouring it into Will's glass. He wasn't close enough to touch, but he was close enough that Will imagined he could feel the heat coming from his body. It was akin to holding the palm of your hand just an inch above an open flame.

"I wasn't expecting Alana to allow you to bring in outside food," he said. He ran his eyes from his side of the table to Hannibal's, where an identical meal sat. There was a steak knife laid out beside both of their plates, and it was as close to a weapon as Will had been in awhile.

For a moment he imagined picking it up and moving behind Hannibal, leaning across his shoulder to whisper goodbye before running it across his throat.

It was a strangely comforting fantasy, and it seemed to give him back his equilibrium, even though he knew the reality of the act was quite out of the question. Serrated knives were never recommended if you were going for a quick kill, and the guards were too close.

In any case, there were things he needed to know.

He sat down while Hannibal took a seat at the other end. The table wasn't overly long, but with just the two of them, it seemed larger than it was. Will was grateful for the distance.

It wasn't always easy to think when Hannibal was so close. Without his suppressants, his body was seemed to have a mind of its own. His hand was shaking as he moved to lift the knife. He curled his palm around it, but made no move to eat.

"Where's Matthew?" he asked. Hannibal looked up at him in amusement, realization lighting his eyes. Will's question was an admission that his suspicions had gone past the point of mere speculation.

"Who?" Hannibal asked, as he sliced off a thin piece of the meat. He lifted the fork to his mouth slowly, and chewed it carefully.

Will's hands tightened on the knife. "The guard that asked you to cut in for me at the ball."

"Ah," Hannibal said lightly. "And why would I know where he is?"

"Did you kill him?" Will demanded.

Hannibal smiled, but returned his eyes to his food. "You're not eating, Will."

"That's because I don't know what it is," he replied.

"It's pork," Hannibal said. "From the Verger farm, actually. Though I must say, the quality doesn't really live up to the hype."

Will looked back at the meat worriedly, swallowing carefully. He wondered if he could manage to hide a piece of it away for testing.

"You can have it tested if you don't believe me," Hannibal said, once again anticipating his thoughts. "Alana told me of your concerns, but I can assure you, it is simply pork."

"You've been aware of my concerns for awhile," Will said, looking up. "You were encouraging them."

"I'm afraid it seems Chilton is the one that has been manipulating you," he said. "Not me."

"Chilton isn't smart enough to manipulate me," Will snapped. "That would take someone of a higher caliber."

"I'm flattered by the insinuation," Hannibal said, "but I could hardly be responsible for these crimes. I was with Jack at the time Mason Verger went missing. Surely he told you."

"Yes," Will said. "That was a neat trick. I'm still trying to figure that one out."

"Has anyone ever told you that you have a rich fantasy life?" Hannibal asked.

The question was perfectly phrased in that it wasn't actually a denial to Will's accusations, and even held a root of truth. "With some frequency," he admitted. He lifted the glass of red wine and swirled it around in his glass. He didn't take a single sip—the idea of breaking the rules appealed to him, but the color reminded him too much of blood. "I often fantasize about killing you, for instance."

"And how would you do it?" Hannibal asked, as he took a sip from his own glass.

"Most recently I was imagining slitting your throat," he said. "But there's something almost elegant about strangulation."

"I've always been partial to strangulation myself," Hannibal agreed.

"Is that an admission?" Will asked wryly.

"Merely an observation," Hannibal countered. "I dealt with many fatal injuries during my time in an emergency room. The majority of them were quite undignified."

"I don't imagine dignity was much of a concern to them at the time," Will pointed out.

"Then perhaps they were where they belonged," Hannibal said.

"Is that what it is? Lack of dignity? Lack of respect?" Will asked. "Are those the triggers?"

"We should all be dignified and respectful, or we are no different than animals," Hannibal said.

"I've been nothing but rude to you since we met," Will told him.

"True, but your rudeness is intelligent and pointed, not ignorant and uninformed." Hannibal quirked a wry grin. "Your wit is something to be admired, and quite rare to find."

"Meaning that you find me entertaining," he realized. "Is that really the only reason I'm still alive?"

"I don't know where you got the idea that I would like to hurt you, but I can assure you it's never been my intention," he said. "I want to be partners. I have asked for nothing but your companionship."

"You forgot the part where you actually ask," Will said dryly.

"I asked you at the opera house as I recall," Hannibal said, taking another delicate sip of the wine.

"And I turned you down," Will said, "as I recall."

"Did you?" Hannibal asked. "Let's not forget this date was initiated by you."

"I wanted to thank you for the gift," he said easily. He leaned back in the chair, giving up any pretense of an intention to eat.

"To what are you referring?" Hannibal asked.

"We're not being recorded," Will said. "We don't have to speak in code. I know what you are. I know you brought me Mason Verger's heart."

"Honestly, Will, I don't know where you get these ideas about me," Hannibal sighed. "The last time I saw Verger was here when I was dancing with you."

"Alright, we can speak in metaphor, if it'll make you more comfortable. I had a dream once, where you had everyone I knew strung up like marionettes, and you were making them dance," he told him. "What do you make of that?"

"That depends," he said. "Where were you?"

"Standing beside you," Will admitted.

"Interesting," Hannibal said. "I think that says more about you than it does about me, wouldn't you agree?"

"How so?" Will asked.

"Dreams are entirely the product of the dreamer," Hannibal said easily. "I'm afraid I can take no credit for it."

"If my visions held nothing of the people they were about, that would make me quite the fraud," Will said. "It's my job to get into people's heads."

"I didn't realize you were still employed by the FBI," Hannibal said.

Will refused to let the slight rattle him. "I'm working freelance these days."

"I'm not your enemy—not even in your dreams, it would seem," he said. "You said your dream was filled with marionettes, but am I correct in assuming there were no strings on you?"

Will could remember leaning back against Hannibal in the dream, just as clearly as if it had been real, and he could feel the phantom strings twisting tighter around him as the dancers moved from one side of the floor to the other—but they hadn't been making him move, he hadn't been a puppet. He'd been a captive of his own making.

"There weren't," he admitted.

"So you were standing next to me," he continued, "of your own free will."

"Is it free will when all roads but one are blocked?" he challenged.

"Of course," Hannibal said. "If you don't like the road that's open, there's always the choice to stay where you are."

Hannibal was answering all the questions with just enough subtext that Will knew he was right in all his suspicions, and not enough of it to prove a damn thing even if he'd gotten the whole conversation on tape.

It occurred to him that as long as he was here, sequestered away in the OPA, he would only ever know as much as Hannibal wanted him to know.

If he was going to get answers, he was going to have to find a way out.

"Thank you for the dinner," Will said, as he got hastily to his feet. "But I really should be getting back to my room."

"You haven't eaten," Hannibal protested mildly.

Will looked at the food. He was fairly sure it was really pork—Hannibal knew he was suspicious, and he didn't think he would have taken a chance like bringing in human flesh, let alone the missing Verger's. He'd taunt him about it, but he would make sure nothing could be held against him. Even if it was, Will doubted he could convince Jack to take the time to test it.

But for some reason the knowledge that it most *likely* wasn't a person didn't really help all that much.

"I've lost my appetite," he decided.

* * * * * *

Hannibal had been unceremoniously escorted from his floor the moment Will announced to the guards the date was over. Hannibal may think he had all the power, that he had blocked all roads out, but he had been underestimating him from the start.

He hadn't expected Will to make it to the opera house, and so he hadn't planned for it. It had caught him off balance, and now Will needed to do it again. Inside the OPA the only weapon available was the wit Hannibal so admired—but outside of it? Will had been trained field agent once upon a time. He'd had the highest solve rate of any profiler in the FBI.

He didn't need to just level the playing field, he needed to *change it*. Outside these walls, he'd been his own person. He could work to solve this case without all the restrictions holding him down here.

He knew it wouldn't be easy. If Matthew were here, he could help him get out easily enough, but without him he was on his own. Thankfully, he had been planning ways out in the back of his mind since he first got here, and all this did was move the timetable up.

When he returned to his rooms, he found a Nike shoebox sitting on the entryway desk. It looked like for once Alana had come through, and Will was grateful he wouldn't have to escape in the uncomfortable dress shoes Chilton had left for him.

The box was sealed shut with clear packing tape, which gave him an idea, and he decided to wait to open it until he sorted out the rest of his plans.

He knew there was a chance he might not survive going after Hannibal. However much Hannibal may think he wanted him as a partner, Will didn't think he'd be chosen over the man's freedom. If Will threatened that, he might just find himself added to the growing list of victims.

It meant he might be leaving Winston behind for good.

He wasn't as worried about the rest, they adored Abigail and they could comfort each other—but while Will had saved Winston one time, Winston had been trying to save him ever since.

He found Winston asleep on his bed, but his tail started thumping the moment he approached. "Hey, boy," Will greeted. "Want to go visit Abigail?"

Winston watched him warily. He could always seem to sense whenever something was wrong. "I've got to go for awhile," he admitted. "I need you to take care of her while I'm gone, okay?"

His tail continued to thump, though a little half-heartedly, and Winston followed him to the elevator. It felt kind of freeing to be able to go into the elevator and have it take him to Abigail's floor without help, and then he was irritated at himself for feeling grateful. That was a sign of Stockholm Syndrome, to be grateful for permission to do things one shouldn't need permission to do.

That's why tonight he was planning to take this elevator all the way down to the ground before the end of the night. He had to get out while he still could.

Winston ran to the door of Abigail's rooms, making enough noise that she had it open before Will even reached it to knock. "Hey," she greeted, smiling at him as she reached down to pet Winston. "What's up?"

"Can you watch Winston for awhile?" he asked.

"Sure," she said, though she looked wary. "Is something wrong?"

"Can I come in?" Will asked. He didn't think Abigail's room was bugged, but the hallway might be.

She moved aside quickly, and Winston followed her in. Will closed the door behind them. "I have to go away for awhile," he admitted.

"Really?" she asked, her eyes widening. "Alana got you out?"

"Not exactly," he said.

"Oh god, you're going to *escape*?" she whispered urgently. "Is this about Matthew?"

"Partially," Will agreed. He knew he was taking a risk to tell her, but at the moment he trusted Abigail more than anyone else except maybe Matthew, and she deserved more than waking up to find he'd disappeared. "I need to find out what happened to him." He awkwardly reached out pat her arm. "I hope things will be better for you here with Alana, but if can, I'll come back to check on you."

"If you *can*?" she asked, her eyes glossy with unshed tears. "Why do I feel like you're not telling me everything?"

"Because some things are dangerous to know," he admitted. "I'm not going to lie to you, Abigail. Please don't ask me to explain."

She didn't, instead, she just fell against him, wrapping her arms around his neck in a cross between a bear hug and a limpet's grip. "Promise me you'll be careful," she demanded, as she pulled him closer, resting her head against his heart.

"I will," he promised. "There's just one more thing I need from you."

"Anything," she said quickly.

"Can I borrow some eye shadow?" he asked.

Abigail went still for a moment, then pulled back and raised an eyebrow. "Come again?"

* * * * * *

He waited until it was almost 8:00 to get everything ready. Once he began, he knew he'd have to move quickly. He'd only get one shot at this, because if he failed he'd be labeled a flight risk and find himself back under 24/7 surveillance.

He started with the Nike shoebox. He carefully pulled the tape from the box, making sure not to bring any of the cardboard with it, then he moved to his phone. His old phone was essentially useless to him now: he was sure that even if they hadn't filled it with spyware, they would have made sure they had some way to use it to track him.

But there was one thing it was good for.

Alana's thumbprint was still visible, dead center in the middle of the screen. He took out the eye shadow Abigail had given him, and crumbled it into a powder before dumping it on the screen. He blew off the excess power and then laid down the tape, pulling it back up to reveal a thumbprint in the color of *Sun-burnt Horizon*.

It wasn't as elegant as the way Freddie had managed to bypass their security, but Will had to work with what he had. He creased the tape and then folded it to catch the print in-between and keep it from smearing, then stuck it in his pocket. He grabbed the shoes then, and quickly put them on. He knew in a few minutes he might not have the required dexterity to tie them: because the hardest, or at least most painful, part of his plan was next on the agenda.

He wasn't sure if Matthew had left his and Abigail's tracking identifications switched, but either way, it was too dangerous to keep the bracelet on. If he was going to get out of here, he was going to have to get out of that first.

He'd taken a course at the FBI once regarding how criminals may be able to slip free from handcuffs: the always popular dislocated thumb method was said to be actually quite rare and even more rarely successful—but they'd still shown how it could be done.

And without the deactivation device to unlock the bracelet, it was the only option he had.

He headed back into the bedroom and grabbed a pullover sweater with a hood, pulling it on quickly. Then he grabbed a tie from his rather superfluous tie rack. He put it between his teeth and tied it behind his head. Alana said the surveillance had been removed from this

room, but he was fairly certain there was a guard on the other side of the door. He couldn't risk the chance a scream might give him away.

He pressed the thumb of his other hand against the bone, wishing they'd put the bracelet on his left wrist instead. Then he jammed his fingers against the bone until it snapped out of place. He let out a silent cry as pain grayed out his vision, and rested his forehead against the floor for a moment as he regained his composure.

When he sat back up, his thumb was hanging limply from his hand. He carefully folded it under the palm of his hand, wincing as he did, before working the bracelet free.

He felt a little faint by the time it was off, but the relief of being free of it more than made up for the pain. He clumsily pushed his thumb back into place, feeling it slide back with a click that hurt nearly as much as the dislocation. His hand was already turning a little red where bruises were beginning to form, but when he tried to bend his thumb, it did as it was told.

He reached back to undo his improvised gag, and picked the bracelet off the floor. He stashed it out of sight underneath the mattress of the bed so they wouldn't immediately find it and realize what he'd done.

With that complete, he knew it was time to go. From this point on he had to move quickly, because he couldn't risk being spotted without the bracelet. He pulled his sleeve low over his sore hand, hiding the injury and the lack of bracelet, before stepping out into the hall.

As he suspected there was a guard there, but Will just stepped around him dismissively. "Going to watch a movie with Abigail," he said, not bothering to meet the guard head on. They were all used to him being antisocial, anyway.

Once he was in the elevator, he hit Abigail's floor first in case the guard was watching the lights to make sure he was going where he said. The doors opened into her entryway, and he got lucky that there were no guards near the entrance. He reached over and closed the doors again, pulling out the thumbprint.

He held it to the scanner…and nothing happened. He cursed as he smoothed out the tape, holding it to light to make sure the thumbprint was visible. He pressed his left thumb right up against it, and held it to the scanner again. This time, the console lit up green.

He hit the garage floor, and then he was heading back down. He backed up to the back of the elevator, hoping no one else called the elevator before he reached the bottom. He hated relying on luck, but he didn't have the time he would need to sketch out a full proof plan. He needed out of here *now*.

He pulled the hood up to hide his face, and tried to recall how Matthew had avoided the cameras the first time. The doors slid open, and he rushed to hide behind one of the large support beams. He made it just in time, because quite apart from the abandoned garage he remembered from the first time, it was now swarming with guards.

He leaned out from the behind the concrete support beam, and could just make out the guards posted by the exit, and a couple more were taking what looked like a coffee break less than

twenty feet away. He turned back, cursing as he leaned back against the support beam—and realized he was facing a backdoor exit. It was almost too good to be true, but there was a blank pad beside it, another thumbprint scanner, so no one was bothering to guard a door that was already secure.

He pushed forward quietly, pulling the piece of tape from his pocket as he did. He pressed it to the scanner, and the door clicked open. He looked back once to make sure no one was chasing him down, then pushed outside. The exit brought him into an empty alleyway.

He pulled out Freddie's phone as he snuck down the alley towards the front of the building, and disappeared right into the crowd hovering around the crime scene tape. He sorted through the contacts before finally landing on the one he was looking for, and hit call.

"Hey," he said, his heart thundering as he glanced back behind him to make sure he wasn't followed. "I need a ride."

There was a pause, and then: "You've gotta be fucking kidding me."

"I'll make it worth your while," he promised.

"Fuck. Okay. Just—just tell me where you are."

* * * * * *

Freddie Lounds wasn't actually the first person he'd want to go to for help—or the second, or the third—but she was the only one with flexible enough morals not to turn him right back in. He just had to give her enough incentive to take on the risk that working with him posed.

Freddie leaned over to open the door, eyeing the dark street with distaste. "Are you trying to get yourself bonded to some alpha rapist?"

"Good to see you too, Freddie," Will said, as he dropped down beside her.

"You're already all over the news," she said. "The story broke a couple minutes ago. Everyone is completely freaking out. I must be nuts not to turn you in."

"I wasn't sure if they'd go public with it," Will said thoughtfully. It had occurred to him that they might not want it to get out that there was an omega loose in the city: the authorities might not be the only ones attempting to seek him out.

"Well, they have, in a big way," she said tensely. "And if they find out I knew anything about it and didn't turn you in, I'm done for."

"And if they don't find out, the story of the century is yours," Will told her. "Along with exclusive rights to me."

"You sure know how to woo a girl," Freddie complained. She glanced at him. "How do you know I'm not gonna drive you straight back?"

"If you were going to turn me in, you would have done it the moment I called," he said. "You're already an accessory, now, Freddie. Anyway, we both know you're too curious to turn back now."

"Good thing I got the nine lives along with the curiosity," she said wryly, as she pulled out. "Fine. I'm in. *For now*. What's the story?"

"Chilton isn't the Chesapeake Ripper," he said. "Hannibal Lecter is."

"Hannibal Lecter?" she said in disbelief. "Christ. What makes you think that?"

"I'm sure of it," Will said. "You do remember this used to be my job?"

"I never got a sense off him," she frowned, before glancing at him for a moment. "Then again, I used to think you *were* a serial killer, and you turned out to be a fucking omega, so what the hell do I know?"

"Help me catch him, and you'll have enough material for a book," he said.

"And just how are we going to do that?" she asked.

"I want to search his house," he said.

"You think it'll be that easy?" Freddie asked warily.

"No, but it's a place to start," Will pointed out. "Are you in or not?"

"*The Chesapeake Ripper: Ruthless Killer or Lovesick Alpha*," she said wistfully. "I could end up on the best sellers list."

"Title needs a little work," Will told her. "But maybe we can focus on catching him first?"

"Don't you have a whole team of agents for that?" she asked him. "It's really more my style to come swooping in after all the messy stuff has already gone down."

"You really think Jack would let you get the exclusive if he was involved?" Will asked. "He'd sideline you in a second. You want the story, you're gonna have to take a risk."

"Easy for you to say," she complained. "Worst thing he'd do to you is fuck you. And I mean that both figuratively, and literally."

"The drive to Baltimore is three hours," he reminded her. "Do we have to argue the whole way there?"

"Got something better to do?" Freddie asked, but she nevertheless reached out and turned on some music instead.

Will somehow managed to fall asleep on the drive, after giving Freddie Hannibal's address. Unsurprisingly, she already knew where it was: *I like to know the players*, she'd said simply.

He woke up when she parked at the curb of an unfamiliar street. He checked the house numbers but they didn't look quite right. "Where are we?" he asked.

"I parked one street over," Freddie told him. "What are you new at this, or what?" She reached across him to the glove box, and it fell open to reveal varied paraphernalia. She grabbed a small leather case, and gave him a pitying look, as though his lack of criminal adeptness was some incalculable failing. "I already circled by his house. He wasn't parked in the driveway, and he usually is. Doesn't use the garage, which I always found strange for someone as meticulous as he is. Wonder what's in there?"

"Have you been stalking him?" Will asked in surprise.

"Hardly," Freddie said. "It pays to know who's involved when I'm working a case. You need to get to know their habits to know how to avoid them, and how to find them, as necessary. This is just basic stuff."

"I had no idea being a journalist was so similar to being a cat burglar," he told her.

"Lucky for you it is," Freddie told him. "Seriously, what would you have done without me?"

It was sad but true. Will had taken the risk in contacting her because trying to get to Baltimore on his own almost definitely would have gotten him caught, and one notable exception aside, he wasn't exactly used to having to sneak onto a scene.

"If I forget to say it later, thank you, for doing this," he told her.

Freddie stopped, looking at him in surprise. "It's not out of the goodness of my heart or anything," she told him. "We're quid pro quo, right?"

"Yes, but still," Will said. "I don't have anything to lose. You do."

"Come on," she said. "It's almost midnight. We go now we can look like a couple walking home from a date. Wait much longer and the neighborhood watch is gonna be calling us in."

Freddie wound her arm through his when they got out, pulling him along across the street. The houses were all high-end and Will imagined he could fit two of his own cabin in any one of them. Hannibal's house still stood out among them. Even in the low light from the street lamps, the grass on his lawn seemed a little more well tended than the rest, his concrete entirely unmarked.

"How about we go in the back?" Will asked. "I can break out the window."

"Amateur," Freddie sneered, pulling out the small leather case. She unlatched it and it fell open to reveal a series of lock picks. "Just watch my back."

Will followed nervously behind her as she knelt in front of the door, and deftly used the picks to work the lock. The door clicked open seamlessly, and she got to her feet and carefully walked inside. She turned on the flashlight app on her phone, leaving the lights off.

Will followed her example. He was pretty sure Hannibal would have been called in by Jack to help in the search for him, but he couldn't count on that. It might just be that he was late getting back.

"Where should we start?" Freddie asked.

"The kitchen," Will decided.

Hannibal's kitchen was, as expected, immaculate. Will frowned as he walked beside the island, running his hand across the pristine surface. Freddie came to a stop in front of the refrigerator.

"Well, he definitely suffers from OCD," she said, when she tugged it open to examine the contents. "But I'm pretty sure the only meat in here came from a cow." She paused. "Not that I have much experience for a comparison."

Will leaned over her shoulder. "He must have cleaned everything out," he realized. "He knew I'd realize it was him and tell Jack."

"You told Jack?" Freddie demanded. "What happened to my exclusive?"

"Don't worry about it," Will told her. "He didn't buy the theory."

"I'm not sure I should, either. Though all this anal retentive cleanliness is mighty suspicious," she said sarcastically.

"You don't think a serial killer that hasn't left behind a single piece of evidence in almost ten years would be neat?" Will asked.

"Point," Freddie agreed. "I'll check the garage."

Freddie wandered off and Will ran the flashlight on his own phone across the walls. Nothing looked amiss. He wouldn't use this part of his house as a killing ground, but it had to be somewhere. As well off as Hannibal was, safe-houses were more often than not smoking guns. He'd want to lower the risk and do the majority of his work in an environment he could control.

The light from the flashlight caught on another door and he paused, staring at it in thought. When he tried the handle, it was locked. Freddie rejoined him a moment later. "Find anything?" he asked her.

"Just selves and selves full of neatly labeled kitchen appliances I've never even heard of," she said. "Sadly none of them had any helpful messages like 'use this one for people,' so it was pretty much a bust." She came up to stand beside him, and glanced at the innocent looking door he was staring at.

"It's locked," he explained.

"Right," Freddie said, taking a breath to steel herself before reaching for the lock picks. She kneeled down to open the door. It took even less time than it did with the front door before it

was swinging open ominously. She looked into the dark room warily.

Will moved past her into the room. There was a large double door refrigerator in the corner, but its shelves were nearly picked cleaned. A large wooden table sat in the center with a number of meat slicers and other kitchen tools he couldn't quite recognize.

"Jesus," Freddie said. "It looks like a butcher shop in here. I don't think I really believed it when we got here—but this is too fucking weird."

Will knew this place looked strange, but there was nothing that couldn't be explained. He wouldn't have a victim here, not where they might be seen or heard. "There's something else," he said, closing his eyes as he took a step back.

He could see Hannibal at work here, preparing his victims: but where would he have come from? How would he have stayed out of sight?

"There's another door in this room," Will said. "He takes his victims somewhere else. But he gets there from here."

"I don't see any doors," Freddie said.

Will looked down at the floor, running his flashlight over the floorboards. "You aren't looking in the right direction," he told her.

She followed his gaze, and her eyes widened. "Trap door?"

They both dropped down, feeling along the edges of the wood until they finally found a break and pulled the door up. The hinges creaked as they forced it all the way open. They turned the flashlights down, but all the light revealed was a steep set of stairs.

"I'll go first," Freddie said reluctantly, moving to start down the steps.

Will reached out to stop her, placing a hand on her arm. "No," he said. "I will."

"But you're an omega," Freddie protested half-heartedly. Even betas were expected to risk themselves when it came to the protection of omegas. The instinct wasn't as prevalent as it was alphas, but it was there.

"I'm also a trained agent," he told her, "and I found this on the table."

He held up a large butcher knife, and Freddie eyed it in approval. "Sold," she decided. "You can go first."

He carefully started down the steps, wishing as he did he had his gun. The lack of light had been disorienting in the house, but here, it was ominous. He heard Freddie starting after him just as he nearly reached the bottom, pulling the door shut behind them with another loud creak. It was hard to make out in the darkness, but he could see what looked like clear shower curtains walling off one side of the room. The place was deeply set in the ground, almost cavernous, and it had to have been custom made.

"Oh my god," Freddie said, as she stopped beside him. "He really is the Chesapeake Ripper, isn't he?"

Freddie reached out for a light switch, and the lights began to slowly click on, though they only lit about half the room. He turned to look at her in question.

"Basement," she said. "No windows, no one to see the light."

"We need to find proof," he reminded her. He moved towards the clear curtain, carefully pulling it aside to walk into a room that looked a shower from a gym. Freddie moved off in front of him, heading into another section of concrete walls.

"There's chemicals on these shelves," she told him. "Mostly lye, and bleach. Well, that's not at all suspicious."

He joined her and kneeled down in front of a cabinet, pulling open a large set of cabinet doors. There was nothing inside. "That doesn't prove anything," he told her. "And he's been getting rid of everything that might. Half this place is empty."

There was a far off creak, and they both froze, turning to look at each other in worry.

Someone had just opened the trap door.

Will lunged forward and grabbed Freddie by the arm, dragging her towards the empty cabinet he'd found. He held a finger to his lips and then motioned to the cabinet silently.

Freddie was a survivor, and once she figured out what he meant she didn't hesitate. She slid into the cabinet and Will closed it behind her. He glanced back towards the stairs, but he couldn't see anyone. He moved back towards the clear curtains, tightly gripping the knife. If he squinted he could just make out a vague shadow in the distorted image reflected back at him from the curtain.

He realized what he was seeing just a faction of a second too late: Hannibal grabbed him from behind, neatly trapping both his arms with one of his, while he used his other arm to latch gently around his neck.

"Easy," Hannibal told him calmly. "Drop it, if you please."

Will let go of the knife, and it clattered to the floor. "Han—" he started to say, but Hannibal tightened his grip, cutting him off.

"This is the second time I've found you somewhere you shouldn't be," Hannibal whispered against his ear. "What am I to do with you now?"

Chapter End Notes

Note: I really tried not to end this on a cliffhanger, but it was heading straight towards 10K, and I did have to stop if this part was ever going to actually end. But I'm so sorry for doing that to you. As such, I will go ahead and spoil you with the obvious: Hannibal does not kill Will. Does that make it better?

Also, I wrote a new Up Next for consistency, but the last one also still sort of applies as I had to split this chapter into two.

Up Next: As Will finds himself pulled deeper and deeper into Hannibal's world, he begins to doubt his ability to navigate his way back out. But if he's going down, he's sure as hell going to take Hannibal down with him.

so mortal was their malice

Chapter Notes

> Note: I'm so sorry about the delay on this! My computer had a minor breakdown (luckily all my stories and notes were backed up!) so I've spent the last week and a half coaxing it back to life--but lost my extremely out of date edition of Microsoft word in the process. Which means I've been without a proper word processor, and typing with my thumbs on my phone does terrible things to my creativity. My computer is working again but still acting up and will probably need to be replaced, so I may be a little slow to update and respond! But I will continue to work on this, even if it's on my phone!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal's voice was reminiscent of a serpent—soothing and hypnotic and *terrifying*, all at once. Will froze in his arms, his breath catching as his heart started frantically pounding inside his chest. He didn't dare try to look behind him: he didn't want to see Hannibal, and he didn't want to make the rookie mistake of looking back where he'd left Freddie.

Will might still manage to talk his way out of this, but she'd be dead before she could utter a word.

"You seem tense, should we take this conversation somewhere more comfortable?" Hannibal asked pleasantly, though it was obviously not a request. He released the hold on Will's neck only to replace it with a tighter hold on his upper arm, which he used it to drag him back towards the stairs.

Will didn't fight him as he was pulled back towards the main house, though his instincts were screaming at him to break free. He held back by reasoning that if Hannibal were planning to kill him, he wouldn't be taking him *out* of his killing ground. It would be counter-productive to pull himself back in the other direction.

Once Hannibal was up the stairs, he reached back to help pull Will the rest of the way out of the basement. He slammed the trap door shut with finality behind them, and then backed Will against the large wooden table. Hannibal's hands were flat on the surface of it on either side of him, though they weren't actually touching him. He wondered if their touch affected Hannibal as much as it did Will, and that was why he was holding back.

Will looked up from Hannibal's hands then, defiantly meeting his eyes. In the low-light the other man's irises looked almost red. Hannibal really did have amazingly unique eyes—the color of dried blood. He tried to imagine looking into them without knowing what he knew, but he couldn't remember what it had been like. Those eyes were so closely tied with the soul they displayed, he couldn't imagine seeing them any other way.

"How did you know I was here?" Will asked, breaking the silence.

Hannibal watched him with such intensity that Will could feel it all the way to the back of his skull. His eyes were piercing but untouchable—he couldn't tell if he was angry, or amused. Will knew that any attempt to flee would not end well, so he settled back against the table to try and maneuver himself into a better position. It didn't really work: they both knew who had the upper hand.

"I was on my way back to New York to help with the search for you when I received an alert," Hannibal told him after a moment. "You tripped a silent alarm."

"Handle your own security, do you?" Will asked. "Didn't think to call to the police? What exactly were you expecting to find?"

"This time? You," he said simply. "The better question is: what were *you* expecting to find?"

"The rest of Mason Verger," Will answered honestly.

Hannibal grinned slightly. "I see. And how did that work out?"

"It seems you've already covered your tracks," Will said. "But you can move a body from a grave—it still leaves you with an empty grave. Most law-abiding citizens don't have a bat-cave."

"That's a strange comparison to make," Hannibal said. "Do you think of me as a vigilante, Will?"

"Killing Mason Verger was pretty much a public service," Will said. "But I'm afraid most of your victims don't quite meet that same standard. Olsson was trying to do the right thing, wasn't he? He reported the Alphamiticin missing because he wasn't involved, and he wanted to find the truth."

"Frederick Chilton is responsible for both of their deaths, not me," Hannibal said. "You should be asking this of him."

"We're alone now, you can tell me the truth," Will said. "I'm not wearing a wire. You know I'm not. Jack would never risk using me as bait."

"Yes, I realize your escape from the OPA is genuine, but I do question your motive in coming here," Hannibal said. "Surely you knew I would have a responsibility to send you back."

"You won't send me back," Will said confidently.

"I won't?" Hannibal asked, watching him in amusement.

"It would derail whatever plans you have for me," he explained. "Because if you send me back, I'll bond with the first alpha that asks just so I won't end up bonded to you. And if you think I won't, you don't me as well as you think."

"And if I don't turn you in?" Hannibal asked. "What happens then?"

"Then you get what you want," Will said. "You get me."

"In what context?" Hannibal asked.

"You really need me to spell it out?" Will asked.

"Considering that even now, you're terrified to touch me, yes, I really do," Hannibal told him. "If you really just wanted me, you wouldn't need to leave for that. You could have accepted me officially. You would have been released by the OPA, and given back all your property. But you escaped, instead."

"Yes," Will agreed. "But if I'd done it your way, I'd still be trapped within the system. I would have chosen you because it was my only way out. I think I've proven I have options. I didn't have to come back here. I could have gone to the docks, and stowed away on a ship. I could have sought sanctuary in Europe."

Will loosened his stance, pushing forward until the lapels of Hannibal's three hundred dollar suit jacket were close enough to brush against the cotton of his hooded sweatshirt. "Instead, I'm here on my own terms," he explained. "You told me a time would come when I'd have to make my own decision. I decided not to be tied to the OPA's rules, not even if you were the one holding the leash. Especially not then, if we're being honest."

"That's a lovely concept, and I'd like to believe you," Hannibal said. "But that doesn't explain what you were doing in the basement."

"I already told you that. I wanted proof that I was right," Will said. "Because you won't admit it to me. And if I'm going to stay with you, I need to know who you are."

"If I allow you to stay here, I could go to prison for helping you hide," Hannibal pointed out.

"If I wanted you in prison," Will said wryly, "I think I could think up a better charge than harboring a fugitive omega."

"And is that what you want?" he asked.

Will wondered what it would be like to have Hannibal in prison. In a way, it would be mutually assured destruction—he wouldn't be able to get Hannibal caught without getting himself caught, too, and it would be wiping out one of his last options to get out of the OPA at the very same time: a bond with Hannibal.

"I don't know yet," Will answered honestly—but what he didn't say was that *want* didn't really enter into it. He planned to see it through, either way.

"And that is why I took such precautions," Hannibal answered easily. "I would hate for you to put either of us in a position where we were against each other. I do have to ask, however, how did you manage to get in?"

"I learned to pick locks back when I was a field agent," Will said. "I took them off Beverly."

"Where are they now?" Hannibal asked curiously.

"I dropped them somewhere in your basement when I was in fear for my life. I can go find them, if you'd like?" Will offered boldly.

Hannibal looked ready to call him out on his bluff, but then he noticed his hand. He went very still, his pupils dilating as he stared at the bruised thumb. "The bracelet," he realized, as he gently reached out to lift Will's hand. Hannibal frowned as he took in the damage. "If you had just gone with me that night at the opera, this could have been avoided."

"Still would have had to come off somehow," he pointed out, looking up to meet Hannibal's calmly furious eyes head on.

"You think you've been treated unfairly," Hannibal said thoughtfully. "But look what it has made of you. Do you realize you never once looked me in the eyes before you were discovered? Since I just came in and found you here, breaking into my home, you've seldom looked anywhere else."

"I suppose you think you've cured me," Will said with a sigh. "Was this whole set up therapy then? Is that your excuse?"

"You still blame me for your discovery?" he asked.

"You're still pretending you didn't have anything to do with it?" Will countered.

Hannibal stepped away. He disappeared into another room and Will watched him go. He could run, and end back in the OPA, but he didn't have enough evidence to do him any good. So he just stood there, waiting for Hannibal to come back.

He returned a moment later with an ACE bandage. He un-spun a length of it from the roll, then gently reached out to grasp Will's hand again. Hannibal's hands felt cool and strangely comforting against the bruised skin, but the truth was that it looked more painful than it actually was. Despite the fact that omegas were treated as weak, delicate creatures, medical studies seemed to confirm that they had the highest pain threshold of all the genders.

"How did you manage to get all the way to Baltimore?" Hannibal asked, as he finished wrapping his thumb and palm.

"Abigail had some cash squirreled away, she lent it to me and I took a cab," Will lied easily.

"Abigail is the young omega at the OPA?" Hannibal asked. "Is it her perfume I smell all over you?"

Will stilled for a moment, before glancing back at Hannibal. "I didn't notice," he said dismissively. "I suppose. I don't have contact with much anyone else."

Hannibal sat Will's hand back atop the table, and then pulled away his own. "What is it you think is going to happen here?" he asked, as he watched him warily. "As long as you're a fugitive, I could never officially bond with you."

"Who said anything about a bond?" Will asked. "I left because I didn't want to play by the rules. You already offered to take me away somewhere that would give me more options. Are

you backing out of that now?"

"You expect me to give up my life here, with no assurance that I'll get anything in return?" Hannibal asked.

"I thought you would have enough trust in your own plans," Will said. "I thought you wanted to run away with me."

"It was something I considered," Hannibal said. "Not the ideal outcome, though perhaps a more exciting one."

"Because you're bored with this life," Will said, the realization unfolding even as he spoke. "That's why you started us down this road. You always knew it might end up with you having to run."

"I thought it would be a rather neat and clean ending for you to officially accept me as your alpha, and come to live with me here," Hannibal admitted. "But that doesn't mean I haven't planned contingencies."

Will was about to respond when Hannibal's cell phone buzzed. He stepped away to answer it. "Hello, Jack," he said calmly. "Yes, I apologize. I was held up. No, I haven't heard from him. Yes, I understand. I will be there shortly."

Will leaned back against the table. "How's the search going?"

"They're rather impressed with your disappearance," Hannibal said, smirking slightly. "They can't figure out how you got the elevator to work. They want me to come search your room to assess your state of mind."

"Any initial thoughts?" Will asked wryly.

"You were feeling trapped, and very angry," Hannibal said. "You wanted to prove you weren't beholden to any of them. That you were better than them all."

"And how am I doing so far?" he asked.

"I think you've proven your point," Hannibal said, then paused for a moment. "It will take some time to make arrangements for our departure, especially as I fear I will be watched. Your accusations against me were not as entirely dismissed as you seem to think."

"Where will we go?" Will asked.

"Venice," Hannibal said. "They have amnesty and no extradition for omegas fleeing restrictive governments. I'll be given amnesty as well, for having aided in your escape. Until then, I'll have to assist with your search to keep up appearances. I need you to stay here."

"You trust me enough to leave me here alone?" Will asked, his lips curling up wryly.

"No, but I do trust that you don't want to be sent back to the OPA," Hannibal said.

"I'm not going back there," Will agreed firmly. "I'd rather let you kill me."

Hannibal reached out, delicately placing his hand beneath Will's chin to tilt it up. "I'm not sure I'd be capable of it," he said, his voice sounding almost disconcerted.

"Because I'm an omega?" Will asked bitterly.

"No," Hannibal said, dropping his hand. "It's what else you are that interests me."

Hannibal stepped away, carefully placing his hands in his pockets. Will thought for just a moment, he saw them trembling. "You're welcome to look anywhere you'd like," he said. "You won't find anything out of place, and I have a guest room, if you would like to get some sleep."

"Thank you," Will said, surprised to find he meant it. He wasn't sure what choice Hannibal was going to make when he first caught him here: he could have killed him, he could have turned him in. It was hard to be too grateful, however, as the OPA only knew about him in the first place due to Hannibal's interference.

That was the game, his sleight of hand: foster dependence, then come to the rescue. He doubted it was the first time Hannibal had used this particular technique, but Will was going to make sure it was the last.

"Be safe," Hannibal told him. "If you get caught, I will deny all knowledge of your presence here."

"I would expect nothing less," Will told him.

Hannibal left with a parting nod, and disappeared in the direction of the front door. Will shakily followed his steps, leaning up against the door to watch out the peephole as he got back into his car and drove away. He waited until he saw the taillights disappear around the edge of the house before he turned and fled back towards Freddie.

He pulled open the trap door and went tripping down the steps, only to be met by a shaking a Freddie at the bottom. She was holding the knife he'd dropped with both of her hands, and she let out a breath in relief when she saw him.

"Oh, thank god," she said, letting the knife fall back to the ground. "I thought I was going to have come rescue you."

"I hate to break this to you, but considering how long you waited, I'd probably already be dead," he told her dryly.

"Why aren't you dead? Or locked up down here?" she asked. "This isn't a set up, is it?" She leaned past him, looking suspiciously back up towards the house.

"I told him I would run away with him," Will said. "That I escaped to get free of the OPA."

"Well, that was risky," she snapped. "If he's planning to whisk you away to the lands of non-extradition, how the hell are we supposed to catch him?"

"Very quickly," Will told her. "Can I have your lock picks? They're part of my cover story."

Freddie sighed and pulled them out, tossing them over to him. "I guess, but I'm putting them on your growing tab," she said.

Will caught the lock picks, and then threw them right back into the darkness of the basement.

"Hey!" Freddie yelled. "If you're just gonna—"

"Come on," Will interrupted. "I don't think he's coming back, but we need to get you out of here." He turned and went back up the stairs, and Freddie didn't waste time in following him out. "Oh, and you need to stop wearing your perfume," he added.

"What, why?" she asked irritably.

"Just trust me on this," Will told her. She grumbled but nodded, following him as he led her back to the front door. He turned around to face her before opening it, and pursed his lips. "I have one more favor to ask you."

"You're running a little low on favors." She glared at him, but faltered when he didn't cave. "Alright, fine. What?"

"I need you to see what you can find out about Matthew Brown," he told her. "He's a guard for the OPA, and he left early from work the same day Mason went missing. No one has heard from him since."

Freddie's eyes gleamed as she caught on to the potential for a story. "I'll see what I can dig up," she promised. "And I expect you to check in at least once a day. Or I'll assume you're busy being seasoned for dinner and call in the cavalry."

"Freddie," he winced. "Please, just…be discreet."

"Discreet is my middle name," she assured him with a wink. She stepped beside him, reaching past him to push open the door and disappear without a second glance.

Left alone in Hannibal's large house, Will wandered back into the kitchen. The gleaming surfaces sat there pristine and sinister, and Will swallowed hard. He'd managed it, and everything had worked out even better than he had hoped. He'd been able to insert himself right into Hannibal's life, and now all he had to do was wait until he had enough evidence to find Matthew and take Hannibal down.

He backed out of the kitchen and walked through the dining room instead. It looked like a cross between something you might find in a Martha Stewart catalog and the Addam's family home. He didn't linger there. He doubted there would be anything to find: Hannibal wouldn’t have brought a living victim there, and whatever had been left of them was sure to be long gone by now.

He found a staircase curling up towards a second floor. He went up cautiously, but there was nothing to fear about the prettily laid surface of the house. It was a model home, with everything set in place deliberately and not a single speck of dust. He found Hannibal's

bedroom first, and it was practically bare it was so free from clutter. Suits were pressed and hung side-by-side in the large closet, colors arranged in a spectrum from dark to light.

The guest room Hannibal had mentioned was a little further down the hall, but he did not feel comfortable there. It was set in the middle of the house, with no windows. The cover set on the queen size bed was neutral blue, and the carpet was a lush white with tiny marbled flecks, but there was something sinister about it. It took him a moment to realize it was the fact that the lock was on the wrong side of the door.

The only place he felt even slightly at ease was within Hannibal's vast library. It was back on the first floor, off from the dining room. Unlike the library at Hannibal's office, which was mostly medical and psychiatric volumes, the selection here was eclectic. He could find everything from Lord Byron to Salman Rushdie, all arranged alphabetically within each genre.

Will didn't want to let his guard down for a moment, but despite the sleep he'd managed on the drive to Baltimore he was feeling uncommonly drained. He pulled one of the books from the shelf and sat down on a camel-back sofa to read for awhile. He needed a moment's rest so he could come up with a better plan than the one he had.

Because if he couldn't get the evidence he needed before Hannibal found a way to get them out of the country, he was going to be the only one that ended up caught.

* * * * * *

The walls of his house were painted with flickering, bright flashes of light. It reminded him of the reflective surface of a swimming pool—only instead of cool blues and whites, the patterns were tinted red and deep orange.

Will was gasping as he tried to push to his feet, but the air was thick and cloying, and it kept sticking in his throat. He scrambled for the front door, only to find that it was blocked by a wall of flames; the cause of the strange, flickering lights.

His house was burning.

He called for his dogs one after another, but received no answer. He could not see them, and could only hope they had already gotten out. He turned towards one of the windows, but tripped and fell on his hands. There was a weight on his back that was slowing him down and throwing him off balance. He looked back slowly, and he could see the wings stretched out behind him, beautiful and bloody.

Wings were so symbolic of freedom, but they felt like a burden instead, holding him pinned to the ground. He tried to stand again only for his hand to slip on a shallow puddle of blood, sending him right back to the floor.

He looked back towards the flames, and frowned when he saw that the front of his house had burned away. When he looked past the wall of fire now, it led instead into Hannibal's living room. Hannibal was standing in the middle of the room, with a pair of his own wings. They

did not appear to be a burden on him; they spread behind him with perfect symmetry, like something from a fifteenth century painting.

Hannibal kneeled down across from him, eyes boring into his through the breaks in the flames. "Why do you do this?" he asked softly, his accented voice carrying across the space between them like it wasn't there. "You're only hurting yourself."

"I don't belong to you," Will panted, glaring back at him. He could feel the cloying edges of the dream surrounding him now, though he could not quite grasp it well enough to change the scene.

Hannibal spread his hands out to his sides, his elbows on his knees, palms held upwards as though in supplication.

"Maybe we belong to each other," he suggested.

Will could feel the heat from the flames sinking into his skin, and he felt as though they would consume him. Hannibal watched him pitilessly, but nevertheless reached one hand towards him through the flames.

"Take my hand, Will," he said.

Will stared at him as Hannibal moved closer, impervious to the flames that flashed around them. Things did look so much easier on Hannibal's side of the flames. His own house was in tatters, melting into fine ash, and it hit him then that he could never come back. His old life was gone, but he could still rise again.

He reached out, and grasped Hannibal's hand.

Will bolted up, reaching out to steady himself as he nearly went tumbling off the small couch. As he tried to catch his breath, he felt beads of sweat trailing down his face. His hair was plastered to his forehead in limp clumps, and his skin felt like it was burning up. His heart started pounding in realization: this was more than a regular night sweat. This was something else entirely.

"I brought you a cup of dandelion tea," Hannibal told him.

Will pushed back against the couch, his eyes widening as he realized Hannibal was sitting across from him. There was a small tea tray sitting on the coffee table between them, with a china teacup full nearly to the brim of a lightly brewed tea.

"It's supposed to help with the symptoms of heat," he continued. "An omega aunt of mine used to swear by it."

"Oh god," Will said, glancing around the room in confusion. The book he'd been reading had been picked up and set on the corner of the table. Hannibal had placed one of the throw pillows beneath his head as he slept.

He didn't remember falling asleep. Letting his guard down around Hannibal had been an incredibly stupid thing to do, and the fact that he was going into heat only made it worse. He

should have prepared for the possibility.

Proximity to an alpha was known to trigger early heats, and Will's system had been out of sorts for weeks. Here in an alpha's home, surrounded by his scent, it had obviously tipped him over the edge.

Hannibal, for his part, seemed utterly unconcerned by the whole thing. Will had heard horror stories all his life about how alphas were unable to control themselves in the presence of an omega in heat—but then, this wasn't the first time Hannibal had controlled himself near him. He'd carried him out of Morton's house and handed him into the care of the ambulance without a second thought.

"I've made you breakfast," Hannibal told him after a moment, obviously trying to give Will time to adjust to his surroundings. "Whenever you're ready."

Hannibal rose gracefully and disappeared into the kitchen, and Will watched him go anxiously. He couldn't have gone into heat at a worse possible time, and he may need to change his plans. No matter how in control Hannibal seemed, Will wasn't entirely sure he'd be able to control *himself*. He hadn't had a heat since he was fifteen years old, and he'd spent it entirely isolated. He didn't know what to expect.

He leaned forward to make sure Hannibal was still in the kitchen, then pulled out his phone and sent Freddie a quick text to let her know that he was still alive. For the moment, at least.

He shakily pushed himself to his feet. He felt uncomfortable in his own skin, but Hannibal's calm reaction to the whole thing was helping to calm him too. There had been times that being alone with an alpha while in heat had been his biggest fear, but it seemed almost inconsequential at this point.

He stumbled into the kitchen after Hannibal, pausing in the doorway to watch him. He was cooking bacon and a pair of omelets simultaneously. It smelled delicious and was making Will nauseous all at the same time.

"You don't really think I'm going to eat any of this?" he asked.

"It's all from the local market," Hannibal assured him. "I've had to curb my more exotic tastes for the moment, whilst you still consider me an enemy."

Will swallowed, and reached up to cross his arms over his chest. "I think I should probably find another place to stay for a few days. Somewhere I can lay low."

Hannibal took the pan with the omelets and sat it on a waiting trivet. "You're concerned I won't be able to control myself while you're in heat?" he asked evenly.

"I just don't think it's a good idea for us to be alone right now," Will said hesitantly.

Hannibal turned off the stove, and turned to pick a teacup up from the counter. He turned back to watch Will. "I think the OPA and the media like to foster the idea that alphas aren't

capable of controlling themselves around omegas, as it reinforces the need to keep them under protection," he said.

"You don't think it's true?" Will asked. "The last we spoke of it, I thought you believed omegas should be protected."

"Ah. I was playing devil's advocate a bit—but as with anything, it's true for some, and not true for others," he said. "Trevor Morton was not able to control himself around you, and you were not even in heat." He leaned back against the counter, sipping his own tea. "I saw the photos of the scene. The front of his shirt was covered in blood from his victims as well as from his own wounds. Your back was covered in the victims' blood only. He had you pinned before you killed him.“

"Yes," Will agreed. There was no point lying about the attack now, not when he'd long since had the secret he'd been keeping it for brought to light.

"The working theory is that you need to be protected from those that are like him," Hannibal said. "When really the better system would be to lock them up, instead."

"That's funny, coming from you," Will said.

"Yes, of course, you're right," Hannibal said. "Locking them up certainly wouldn't be my first choice."

"That's not exactly what I meant," he frowned. "There's no one here, Hannibal. My credibility with Jack and Alana is already shot, they won't believe a word I say against you. There's no reason left to pretend."

"I can think of plenty of reasons," Hannibal said. "Are you sure you won't eat?"

Will narrowed his eyes. Maybe it was the nonchalant way Hannibal had brushed off his heat, or maybe it was his own instincts wanting to challenge an alpha that wasn't giving him the attention his body craved, but Hannibal’s refusal to own up to what he was *enraged* him.

"I need you to admit it. If this thing between us is going anywhere—then you have to be honest," Will snapped. "I'm tired of speaking in riddles. I know it was you. Everyone thought the Ripper was losing control, but you never were. You were making each and every mistake an asset. You were using them all to lead us back to Chilton."

“We’ve talked about your vivid imagination," Hannibal told him, as he set aside the tea.

"Stop lying to me!" Will shouted. "It's insulting. I know exactly what are you."

"And do you know yourself?" Hannibal demanded. "You want me to acknowledge something you won't acknowledge in yourself. "

"If nothing else, I just want you to admit that you did this to me," Will challenged. He stepped forward, edging around the island so he could face the other man head on. "You were behind all of it. You wanted me trapped."

"You have rightly ascertained my part in the events," Hannibal told him after a moment. "But I fear you have greatly misread my motivations."

Will laughed in disbelief. "Right, I forgot," he said. "You were doing me a favor, cause you know what's best, right? You just wanted me broken!"

"You were already broken," Hannibal snapped, his voice barely needing to rise to cut through the air like a physical blow. "You lived in fear, Will. That's what Alana told me about you, when she first asked me to talk to you. She said you lived in fear, and I knew why the moment I met you. Fear of your power. Fear of being revealed. You feared when you were better than the rest of them all together, and there's only one way to destroy fear. You have to face it."

Will's breath caught as Hannibal stepped closer. He should have backed away, he should have been running—but for the first time since he met him, the thought of touching Hannibal didn't terrify him.

Hannibal framed his face with his hands, tilting it just slightly up so he could meet his eyes. "You had to go through this to become who you were meant to be," he said. "Tell me honestly, have you ever felt more alive than you do in this moment?"

"No," Will admitted, though his voice was shaking. He'd been walking through his entire life hidden behind walls so high he'd almost entirely lost sight of what went on beyond them. He'd been safe, and bored, and so terribly alone.

Hannibal tilted his head to the side, leaning in press his mouth against the pulse in his neck. He could feel Hannibal's teeth scraping gently at his skin, and went still. "Please, don't—"

"I won't," Hannibal promised, laying a soft kiss on his neck instead. He lifted his head back to again meet his gaze. "Not until you ask it of me."

"Why did you do it?" Will asked breathlessly. "Why place me somewhere out of reach?"

"You never would have admitted to me what you were," Hannibal said. "I could already see you planning to find a way to cut me out of your life. I didn't want you by force, I'm not like Morton. You needed to accept what you were, and you needed the world to accept it."

"Chilton was in on it with you, wasn't he?" he asked.

"He was more than happy to provide me with the Alphamiticin, under the understanding that any newly discovered omegas would be turned over to his care," Hannibal admitted.

"Of course," Will laughed, stepping back from him. "And then you used that to keep him under your control."

"From a purely evidentiary standpoint, everything pointed to the fact that Chilton had taken the Alphamiticin and then set up Olsson to take the fall," Hannibal explained matter-of-factly. "He kept quiet because attempting to point his finger at me would have done him little better good than it's doing him now."

"And all that just for me?" Will asked. "You've certainly gone to a lot of trouble, and now you're going to pretend the choice is mine?"

"I'm not going to pretend I haven't tried to make choosing me to your advantage," Hannibal said. "But the choice remains yours. I am a patient man, and trusted you would come to me on your own. And here you are."

"And what if I never want to bond?" Will asked. "Not even with you?"

"I have never once put in to attempt to court an omega," Hannibal told him easily. "I never intended to take a mate. If you don't want to bond, we won't."

Will watched Hannibal carefully, feeling even more confused when he found that he believed him. Hannibal had overturned his entire life just to see what he would uncover, and now he was saying he would just as easily leave him behind. "Why couldn't you have just left me alone?" he asked desperately.

"Have you heard of the myth about true mates?" Hannibal asked casually.

"It's just like any other soul mate story," Will said dismissively, recalling Abigail's outlandish romantic movies. "It doesn't really exist."

"Perhaps not," he agreed. "But every myth is built upon something. It would not surprise me if the person to have started it had felt about someone the way that I did upon first seeing you." He watched him, eyes assessing. "Or are you going to tell me you felt nothing?"

"I felt like I was drowning," Will admitted. "That's what I've felt, ever since I met you."

"Yes, exactly," Hannibal agreed pleasantly. "It's quite unlike anything else. I do believe we were meant to find each other."

"I don't really believe in fate," Will said.

"What is fate but a word to describe the place we end up?" Hannibal asked. "Whether you think it was destined or not, every choice we have made in our lives has lead us both here. Now it's up to us what we do with it. I hope you will follow me, but I fear you are still uncertain."

"There's still so much you haven't told me," Will said. "Even if I can forgive you for outing me as an omega, you're the Chesapeake Ripper. I've been trying to find you for years. You've caused so much suffering, and you don't regret a moment of it."

"Do you regret putting ten bullets into Trevor Morton?" Hannibal asked him.

"It's not the same," he protested, but he wasn't as certain of that as he'd like. He had seen colleagues go through weeks of therapy after the first time they killed someone on the job—he'd seen them inconsolable over taking the life of someone that would have just as easily done the same to them.

Will hadn't needed much longer than ten minutes to get himself together. He'd even been haunted by Trevor for awhile, and it only occurred to him now that the ghost he'd been carrying along with him had never once made him feel guilt. He'd found him *comforting* instead, like some messed up imaginary friend.

What kind of person was he that he felt no regret? That he had felt a rush of adrenaline, and if anything, a little thrill that what he was doing was *right*?

"Ah, and now you understand," Hannibal whispered.

"We're not the same, Hannibal," he insisted quietly. It seemed to echo in his mind, like a well-known refrain.

"No, not the same, but similar," he countered. "We have different reasons for what we do, but the art of it is something we can both appreciate. Or are you going to look me in the eye and tell me you didn't enjoy it when Chilton was hauled off right in front of you?"

"Chilton is innocent," Will said.

"That is not what I asked," Hannibal pointed out. "You said you want me to help you get away. That makes us, partners, Will. I need to know you can accept who I am as entirely as I accept you."

"You won't even admit it to me," he said. "You're still pretending. You're still wearing a mask."

"Why should I bother to take it off when you can see through it?" Hannibal asked. "You knew what you were getting when you came here. Now I need you to prove to me you're here for what you claim."

"How am I supposed to do that?" Will asked.

Hannibal was about to respond when his phone began ringing. He stepped away to pick it up off the counter a few feet away, and Will let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding as he was finally given enough space to think.

"Yes," Hannibal answered. "I'll be heading there now." He looked back at Will as he hung up. "I'm expected back in New York immediately, apparently they have a lead. I'm afraid our breakfast will have to wait. You really should eat something though." He looked Will over, slightly disapproving, and added, "And of course you're welcome to use the shower."

Hannibal reached for a suit jacket that was left over a barstool, and started for the front door. Will turned to follow him in concern. "What lead?" he demanded.

"It's nothing to be concerned about, they're reaching all the wrong conclusions," Hannibal assured him. "They think you've run off with Matthew Brown."

"Matthew?" Will gasped. "You know where he is, don't you? Hannibal, I need you to tell me where he is."

Hannibal ignored him, stepping outside with only a brief glance back. "Please do at least have some of the eggs," he said.

"Where is he?" Will demanded, hitting the door in frustration as Hannibal went down the front walk. "Hannibal!"

He was ignored, and he couldn't risk chasing after him and being seen. He slammed the door shut and rested his head against it. Hannibal wasn't even remotely concerned about Jack trying to track Matthew. That could really only mean one of two things:

Hannibal knew he was somewhere he wouldn't be found, or…

Matthew was already dead.

* * * * * *

Will was angry and anxious after Hannibal left, more on edge than usual with the strange fevered heat rushing through his blood. He had done a lot of research into omega heats, trying to understand them without wanting to do any of the research first-hand. Heats generally happened once a month for any presented omega under the age of about fifty-five. The heat was actually a little bit literal, as their temperatures tended to rise throughout the course of the cycle. He had never bought the propaganda that an omega in heat was unable to control his or her actions, but there was some evidence to indicate it would both lower the inhibitions and infect the mind with a the subconscious biological need to reproduce.

Despite the whole thing being entirely natural and experienced by the child-bearing half of a number of different species, Will had always been slightly horrified about the whole thing. It seemed more like a virus than a natural function: like a possession. He had taken steps to never allow himself to be vulnerable, and now here he was. Not only was he on the first day of his first heat in nearly twenty years, he was hiding out in an alpha serial killer's house.

He tried to recall the particulars of his first heat as he went up the stairs towards the guest bathroom. He remembered he was hit hardest the first day, and it was milder on the next. By the third day, he was downing his father's suppressants like candies and pretty much back to normal. Unfortunately, Hannibal didn't use suppressants: he controlled himself eerily well without any apparent need for them.

Will got in the shower after locking the bathroom door, and washed up quickly. He didn't think the lock would actually stop Hannibal if he returned, but at least it would give him some warning. Hannibal hadn't told him he could borrow some clothes, but Will had a suspicion he wouldn't mind, so he went to his bedroom after he finished cleaning up and grabbed the plainest clothes he could find, a pair of expensive looking workout pants and a soft blue t-shirt from one of the drawers.

He wanted to check on the news then, but it was easier said than done. It took Will almost two hours just to find Hannibal's television. It was set against the wall inside a picture frame in his home office, painted landscapes cycled out every three minutes on a screen saver. Will was certain he would have found it sooner if he hadn't been half-convinced that Hannibal didn't even own a television set.

The remote was in plain site in a neat little holder on the desk, and he quickly used it to turn the television on. He was anxious over Hannibal's comments about Matthew, and he needed to know what story they were setting up around him.

It didn't take long to find the coverage, his picture was on almost every channel. In the end, some inane sense of loyalty had him landing on Freddie:

"—ould have you believe that the OPA medical attendant Matthew Brown is involved in the disappearance of our newest omega. My sources, however, indicate that Matthew Brown was among the missing days before Will Graham walked right out of the Omega Care Center, and could not have been involved in his escape. Surveillance video managed to capture Graham exiting the elevator alone: if Brown was involved in the disappearance, why would he have given up his position and standing with the OPA instead of using it to get him out? I'm afraid the truth is probably far more grim. Brown was close to Graham, and we all know how well his previous suitors have fared. The fact that Brown disappeared just shortly before Mason Verger seems rather telling."

Will turned of the television in frustration as it went to commercial, and grabbed his phone to call Freddie. "What have you found?" he demanded.

"Good to hear from you, glad you aren't dead," Freddie said. "You saw my segment, I'm guessing?"

"Freddie—" he started angrily.

"What? I thought you'd be pleased. Every other channel is painting him as a no good omega-napper," she explained. "I'm pretty sure that's how your new roommate Hannibal wants it."

"Just tell me what you've found," he said impatiently.

"Loathe as I am to rejoin you in the spider's parlor," Freddie said after a moment, "this is something we need to do in person."

"You can't come back here," he told her quickly. "He will kill you. You've probably already drawn his ire by running a different story than the one he wants."

"I've got visual aids, Will," Freddie said. "I'm not gonna run a Go-To-Meeting on my phone. I'll sneak into the backyard, no one will see us."

"Freddie, wait—" Will sighed in frustration when she hung up instead of bothering to listen to reason. He didn't bother to call her back. He figured they would probably be safe enough if Hannibal truly was on his way back to New York, and he had no reason to think that he wasn't. Still, it made him nervous.

Freddie Lounds was not his favorite person by any means, but Will had started them both down a very dangerous road. As far as the press were concerned, the matter of the Chesapeake Ripper had been closed. He could have left it alone, and perhaps Hannibal would have curbed his appetite on his own to keep the attention off himself.

Now he couldn't help but think Hannibal had taken their earlier conversation as some kind of challenge.

Despite his worry, he decided it would be best to wait for Freddie outside. He didn't know how far away she was, and didn't want her to be here any longer than necessary. He had seen a door leading to the backyard when he had explored the library, but he had not paid it much attention the night before.

During the day, it looked like an entirely different place.

There was a large cast-iron gazebo off to one side, and flower beds scattered all across the fence lines. He didn't recognize most of the flowers, they appeared to be fairly exotic. There was a small gate to one side of the house, and he carefully unlatched it for Freddie, before moving back to the relative safety behind the house. The gazebo itself was ringed by some kind of orchid: they looked to be in the shape of tiny little people. There were two chairs and a table inside the gazebo, so he carefully stepped into it to wait. Ivy crept up around it on all sides, giving the illusion of privacy and providing some welcome shade.

He wondered briefly at the time Hannibal had taken to create this ordered little world for himself. Will's home had been chaos personified: full of strays and second-hand furniture. He had stacks of abandoned hobbies cluttering up his back rooms while his living and sleeping space were full to the brim of his current ones. For a moment, he wondered how much their chosen lifestyles might reflect the inner workings of their minds.

"Jesus," Freddie exclaimed, "why is it everything suddenly becomes ominous when you know it's owned by a serial killer? This is the creepiest garden I've ever seen, I swear. Also, after last night, I don't think I'll ever be able to walk through the KitchenAid aisle at Macy's quite the same way."

Will glanced up as Freddie slipped into the gazebo, eyeing the whole thing warily. He wondered if hers was the normal reaction, and his strange, reflective appreciation of it should be cause for concern. "What did you find?" he asked quickly. "I don't want you here any longer than you need to be."

She frowned as she looked at him, her eyes slowly widening in dawning horror. "Oh my god, are you in *heat*?" she hissed. "And you're worried about *me* being here?"

"I'm fine," Will said, a little disconcerted that it was that easy for an even a beta to see. "Just tell me what you've found."

Her frown deepened, but she pulled a map from her pocket and unfolded it on the table. A line had been drawn across a distinct route in red pen. "It turns out that all OPA vehicles have GPS," she told him. "One of my sources was able to tell me that Matthew left that day in one of their vans. Your buddy Jack already pulled the last known route, and they managed to snag me a copy."

Will sat down, pulling the map towards him. It originated at the Omega Care Center, but it stopped seemingly in the middle of nowhere. "What's here?" he asked, pointing to the last known location.

"Nothing's there," she said. "If you ask me, that's where he pulled over to disable the GPS. Or someone did, anyway."

"He was headed towards Baltimore," Will whispered.

"Yeah, I noticed that, too," Freddie said. "It's actually one of the few things working against their convenient story that he's the one that took you. This little side trip doesn't make sense in any scenario they can think of."

"You said you think Hannibal is pushing the idea?" Will asked.

"Pretty good cover, you ask me," she shrugged. "Blames Chilton for the murders, blames Brown for you. No one blames him. But he won't be able to influence the search for you any longer, they kicked him off the case."

"What? When?" Will asked, glancing up in surprise.

"This morning," Freddie said. "Dr. Bloom didn't think it was appropriate for an alpha known to be courting you to be assisting in your search. Jack reluctantly agreed."

"If that's true, he could be back here any minute," Will snapped. "What were you thinking coming here?"

"I was thinking you might want to leave with me," she said. "We don't have enough to get him, but we have enough to go to Crawford. I thought you staying here was a bad idea *before* I realized you were in heat. Don't be crazy, Will. You stay here, you're going to end up bonded to a killer."

"He wouldn't do that," Will insisted.

"Because he's such a well-behaved serial killer?" Freddie snapped. "Look, I thought you might be nuts when you first suggested this, but now I'm starting to realize just how far down this rabbit hole goes. I don't think he was just the Chesapeake Ripper. I found out he was questioned for a series of murders over forty years ago in Italy. There, they called him 'Il Monstro.'"

Will looked back over at her, not so much surprised as interested. "Really?"

Freddie narrowed her eyes. "Please tell me you aren't actually falling for him," she said. "I swear to god, if you screw me on this—"

Will glanced back at the map, and the strange sudden stop of that red line. "You just told me Matthew was heading to Baltimore," he said quietly. "I think we both know what that means."

Freddie deflated, leaning back against the ivy-covered gazebo wall with her arms crossed. "You think he killed him," she said.

"You don't have to worry about me," Will said, resolve steadying his voice, "I'll stick to my end of the plan." He looked over at her. "You worry about yours."

“And what is mine?” she asked.

“Keep digging,” he told her. “Find Matthew.”

“You really think there’s anything left of him to find?” she asked quietly.

Will swallowed. “I think Hannibal has a plan for him,” he said. “If he’s setting him up to take the blame for my disappearance, he’s got him stashed somewhere. We find him—“

“And we’ve got Hannibal,” Freddie finished. She looked back at Will then in reluctant worry. “I really don’t think I should leave you here alone. You’re so focused on catching him, have you stopped to think that maybe you’re doing exactly what he wants?”

The thought had occurred to him. Will knew Hannibal wasn’t the trusting sort—he wouldn’t have just accepted blindly that Will had decided to go along with him. He would be playing along until he could find a way to ensure Will’s loyalty, or until he managed to convert him completely.

Will wasn’t so overconfident as to not admit the process was working. He knew Hannibal was manipulating him, too. Maybe he was even right—maybe Will did have Hannibal to thank for the fact that he wasn’t afraid to look anyone in the eye anymore, that he was sick of hiding what he was. In a strange way, it was thanks to Hannibal that he was taking back control of his own life.

But that also meant that Hannibal had only himself to blame.

“You might be right,” he admitted. He looked back at her. “But he thinks he has the upper hand.”

“You think he doesn’t?” Freddie scoffed.

“He doesn’t,” Will said. “Because he doesn’t know about you. You’re my safety net. If you don’t hear from me every four hours, call in the cavalry.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked suspiciously.

“It’s not what I’m going to do,” he said wryly. “It’s what he might do.”

“You think he’ll hurt you?” Freddie demanded.

Will thought of Hannibal in the kitchen, his uncertainty as he watched Will. Hannibal had seemed for a moment so unlike himself, infected with a compassion he didn’t understand or quite know how to circumvent. There was a part of him that wanted Will dead, Will was sure of it, it was just a matter of what side of him might win out.

“I think this is going to end badly, one way or another,” he admitted. “So it’s probably best you get out of the line of fire.”

Freddie reached over and refolded the map, sticking back in her pocket. “I hope you know I’m going to feel really guilty if you get yourself killed,” she said. “Really, I’ll probably be

inconsolable for at least two whole days."

He grinned slightly. "You know, that's exactly how I feel about you," he said. "So try not to get yourself killed, either."

Freddie just shook her head, grinning back. "Unlike you, that's actually my first priority," she promised.

* * * * * *

Will spent the next three hours or so doing research into 'Il Monstro' on his phone and waiting for Hannibal to show up. He was beginning to worry about the fact that he hadn't returned. It had been more than enough time for him to have made the drive back, but he hadn't heard anything from him.

He was just about to send a quick check-in text to Freddie when he finally heard the sound of a door unlocking. He stood to meet Hannibal, bypassing the front door to head to the back with a frown when he realized it was coming from the garage. The door opened and Hannibal stepped inside, just a few feet away, and Will felt his heart drop right out of his chest.

Because Hannibal was wearing a plastic jumpsuit over his three-piece pinstriped suit.

Will spun on his heel, starting to run for the front door. He only made it four steps before Hannibal reached him. Hannibal caught him around the waist, keeping his arms pinned to his sides, and pulled him back.

"Shh," Hannibal whispered in his ear, tightening his grip until Will went still. "I'm not going to hurt you, I've brought you a gift."

Will let out a shaky breath, trying to fight down his instincts to run. "What have you done?" he demanded quietly.

"Are you going to behave?" Hannibal asked.

Will bristled at the patronizing comment, but managed to nod an acknowledgement. He knew he wasn't leaving this house now without either Hannibal's permission or a lot of luck, so he really had no choice at the moment but to play along.

Hannibal kept his grip on him as he led him back into the garage. His expensive car sat there looking like it belonged on a showroom floor, but the sight of the trunk was ominous. Will swallowed hard as they grew closer, wondering what it might reveal and steeling himself for what he would see.

Hannibal pressed a button on his key fob, and the trunk slowly raised on its own. It was covered to the edges in clear plastic sheeting, small little rivers of spilled blood collecting within its folds, and an alpha had been zip-tied and gagged and thrown right in the center of it.

Wide, terrified eyes stared back at him and sickeningly, the only emotion Will could feel was relief.

Because it wasn’t Matthew.

“This is the alpha that dared touch you,” Hannibal told him, sounding vindictively pleased.

Will recognized Gregory Briggs without the introduction. He glanced back to look up at Hannibal, and felt a shiver go down his spine at the look in his eye. This was Hannibal finally dropping the pretense, this was Hannibal as he was. He could see now firsthand the details he put into his work: the plastic covers on everything, disposable and easy to clean. He could take Gregory through the hall right to the kitchen and the little room that led to the basement without leaving a speck of evidence behind.

No one looking at this beautiful house from the outside would ever have any inkling what was happening inside.

“Are you pleased?” Hannibal asked him.

“Why would you bring him here?” Will asked shakily, even as he knew. He knew what this was.

This was *initiation*.

“You said you wanted to know me, this is me,” Hannibal told him. “Now I want you to get to know yourself.”

“Don’t—“ Will started.

“I want you to kill him,” Hannibal finished. "I know you've thought about it. I saw the look in your eye when you stabbed him."

Will tore his eyes from Gregory's fearful gaze and ran them over the bound hands. He could see four red marks across one of the man’s hands, where the cuts were healing slowly. The memory brought satisfaction and the satisfaction brought guilt.

"This isn't me," Will protested weakly.

He wasn't whatever Hannibal saw in him. He was capable of killing but he wasn't a *killer*—or at least, he didn't *want* to be.

"I'll be with you the whole time," Hannibal promised seductively, "we can take as long with him as you want."

"I...I need a minute," Will said. "Can you just--"

"Of course." Hannibal released his hold. “But don’t go far,” he warned. "We're on lockdown together now until we leave. I got us both passports under new identities and plane tickets at the ready. Once we tie this last loose end, we'll be free."

He remembered his dream and those heavy blood soaked wings weighing him down to the floor. Hannibal wasn't freedom: he was an anchor.

Will stumbled back the moment that Hannibal let him go, and tried not to run as he stepped back into the house. His hand itched to call Jack but he needed to put distance between himself and Hannibal first. He slipped into the bathroom down the hall, and locked the door behind him. He knew calling Jack probably wouldn't be enough to save Gregory, or maybe even himself, but this was the mistake he'd been waiting for Hannibal to make.

He wouldn't get another chance. He pulled out his phone and typed in Jack's number, anxiously biting his lip as he waited for it to connect.

But nothing happened.

He frowned and checked his signal, surprised to find his connection was lost. He frantically went to the settings, but still couldn't get a signal. His attempts were interrupted by a polite knock on the door.

"I'm afraid you're not going to be able to make a call," Hannibal told him through the door, "I've jammed all the cell frequencies."

Will looked up as the door clicked and then slowly opened. He saw Hannibal casually putting a key back in his pocket. He was still wearing his plastic jumpsuit, and it only made his casual civility that much more jarring.

"The phone, please," Hannibal said.

Will numbly handed it over. Hannibal frowned as he took in the feminine looking phone case. "Alana told me you left your phone behind, but I had a feeling you had one stashed somewhere. I was hoping I was wrong."

He looked up then, his expression weary and resigned. "I'm so disappointed in you, Will," he said. "I took such care to plan everything. But I never could predict you."

"I'm not going to kill with you," Will told him. "You should have known that."

"Perhaps," Hannibal said. He set the phone on the bathroom counter. "Or perhaps the one mistaken here is you. You're still fighting against your own best interest."

"Maybe I'm tired of being told what my own best interest is," Will snapped. He glanced behind him, before running his eyes back over the counters—but there was nothing there he could use to defend himself. He still felt weak and tired from his heat, and Hannibal's disapproval was almost like a physical grip around him, trying to tug him closer, trying to bring him to heel.

He pushed the feeling down, and returned his eyes to Hannibal's. "What happens now?"

"Now I will regrettably have to take care of Gregory on my own," Hannibal said. "I would have you watch, but I fear you're not ready for that. I wish you hadn't escaped the OPA, it really was much too soon."

Will gave a tired smile. "I knew that was the only way to get to you," he said. "You had a plan. I had to circumvent it."

“Yes, well done,” Hannibal said. He stepped forward, and Will glanced up, standing his ground. “Was it worth it?”

“I just wanted the truth,” Will told him. “You’ve been lying to everyone for so long, pretending to be someone you’re not. You say I know what you are, but I’m not even sure that you know what you are. How should I?”

Hannibal snagged his arm, ushering him out in front of him back into the hall, before firmly tugging him up the stairs. Will warily glanced back towards the garage, but the door was closed and he could not see in what state Gregory had been left. “Where are you taking me?”

“I’m afraid you’ll need to be my guest for awhile yet,” Hannibal explained. “I’ll need to take care of those loose ends on my own.”

“I’m not leaving with you,” Will told him.

“Yes, I think you’ve made your position clear,” Hannibal said. He pulled Will into the guest bedroom, and then shoved him gently towards the bed. “Once I’m gone, you may tell whoever you like of what you’ve learned, but I’m afraid there won’t be any evidence to back you up, and I’ll be taking that flight alone.”

“You’re just going to leave me here?” Will asked in disbelief.

“You’re not ready to join me,” he said. “I plan to respect that. Though I’m sorry to say the OPA may not be as understanding as I am, and I doubt you’ll be given another chance to escape them.”

“Why would you do this?” Will asked. “You had to know I wouldn’t kill him.”

“I actually wasn’t,” Hannibal said thoughtfully. “But that’s why I did it. I had to know for sure. I could never run away with you if I thought you were plotting against me.”

“Because this was never a gift,” Will said. “It was a test.”

“One I’m afraid you failed,” Hannibal agreed, as he turned back towards the door.

Will remembered the lock on the outside of that door. Whatever Hannibal’s end game for him truly was, he was planning to lock him up here in the meantime. He couldn’t afford to let that happen. He glanced to his other side and the heavy, antique lamp sitting on the nightstand next to him, then back to Hannibal.

As Hannibal took another step towards the door, Will surged to his feet, grabbing the lamp and swinging the base of it at the other man’s head. It connected solidly, and Hannibal stared at him for a moment, dazed, before losing his balance and slowly collapsing to the floor. Will dropped the lamp and scrambled over him, pushing outside the room and pulling the door shut behind him, before quickly turning the lock.

He heard Hannibal yelling his name as he turned and fled back down the stairs, but he couldn’t afford to hesitate. He had to get Gregory out and get them both to Freddie: with a witness, they might have enough to convince Jack. The trouble was he didn’t have long to get

out of here, and he had to pray that Hannibal had left the keys in his car. He wasn't sure how long that bedroom door would be able to hold him back.

He pushed open the door to the garage, and noticed that Hannibal had shut the trunk again. He went to the driver's side to see if the keys were still there, but there was no sign of them. Hannibal must still have them on him.

He stepped back from the car for a moment, thinking through his options. If he left Gregory here, Hannibal would find a way out of that room and make all the evidence disappear once again. He slowly moved back to the trunk, running his eyes across the surface until he saw a small release button.

He looked around and noticed a pair of hedge trimmers hanging neatly on a garden rack against the wall. He needed to get Gregory and somehow get them both to safety. He grabbed the trimmers and then carefully reached out and pushed the release button on the trunk, before stepping a safe distance back. Gregory's eyes widened as he saw him, before turning calculating when he realized Will was alone. Will watched him just warily in return.

"I'm going to get you out of here, okay? Nod If you understand." Will watched as Gregory gave a clipped nod, which would have to be good enough. Will could already hear noises coming from the house behind him, so he didn't waste anymore time. He reached out and lowered the gag on Gregory's face, before moving to cut the zip ties at his wrists and ankles.

"We need to get out of here quickly," Will told him.

Gregory sat up shakily. Will could see now that he'd been hit in the head. He was bleeding down the side of one face. "Can you stand?" Will asked, when Gregory made no further move to get out of the trunk.

Gregory was watching him intensely, his pupils expanded to nearly reach the outer edges of his irises. "You smell...amazing," Gregory said, as he finally stumbled from the trunk. "Are you...are you in heat?"

"We don't have time for this," Will told him, glancing nervously back towards the house. He could hear a sharp bang every few moments—Hannibal slamming himself into the locked door. "We need to leave now, do you understand?"

"He hasn't claimed you yet," Gregory said with a snarl, suddenly reaching out to grab both of Will's upper arms. "You're in heat and he hasn't claimed you, maybe he's not such a strong alpha after all."

"You need to let me go," Will said. "Don't you remember what happened last time?"

"I do remember, but I'm gonna do you a favor, sweetheart, and I'm gonna forgive you for that," Gregory purred, "I'm gonna claim you like you deserve."

"You need to stop and think about this," Will told him. "Hannibal could show up any moment. We need to run."

Gregory just grinned at him, his fingers tightening around his arms, any rational form of thought obviously far out of his reach. It was no use, Will realized. It was like trying to help a rabid dog—it wasn't going to work and he was going to end up bit.

But Will wasn’t going down without a fight. As Gregory leaned forward, pushing in towards his neck, Will drove his knee up in-between Gregory's legs. Gregory dropped like a stone, groaning as he fell, and Will spun and turned towards the garage opener on the wall. Will took a few steps, reaching out to press it, and a hand grabbed his ankle, pulling it out from under him.

Will fell hard against the pavement, catching himself on his hands and forearms. He turned to look behind him and Gregory was grinning madly as he started to drag him closer. Will flipped onto his back, and then kicked out with his free foot, slamming it right into Gregory's nose. Blood started gushing from Gregory's face, and he snarled in rage even as he was forced to loosen his grip on Will. Will managed to push himself up to his hands and knees, scrambling forward only to be grabbed again.

He pulled his eyes from Gregory, turning them back ahead, and there were the shelves Freddie had been so unnerved by. They held kitchen appliances all neatly stacked and sat in rows.

And right in front of him was a round replacement blade for a meat slicer.

Gregory pushed forward and fell onto Will's back, muttering as he tried to hold him down the floor and climb up him far enough to reach his neck. Will recalled the feel of Trevor at his back, ready to claim him, and reached out for the blade.

The rounded blade had no solid edge to hold, so the sharp edge dug into his palm as he wrapped his bandaged hand tightly around it. He twisted beneath Gregory, pulling back the blade as he did, and then he ran it straight across Gregory's throat in one quick, unhesitating move.

Will watched as if in slow motion as the skin at Gregory's neck split apart, blood suddenly bursting out as though from a fountain. He could feel the warmth of it as it splattered across his own face, and he pulled back, gasping for air as Gregory collapsed limply across his knees. Will jerked away from him, hitting his back against the shelves. He couldn't even feel any pain in his hand, despite that the blade he held had broken through the bandage and wedged itself into the skin of his palm.

He pushed further away from Gregory's body as the last of the life drained from the man’s eyes. Will looked between his split throat and the bloody blade in his hand, unable to reconcile what had just happened. This had been different than Trevor. Trevor had been clinical, and calculated, and done from feet away.

Gregory had bleed out right across his lap.

Will heard footsteps approaching, and glanced up to see Hannibal standing in the doorway. He was still in his plastic suit, his forehead smeared with a small amount of blood from the hit by the lamp. Hannibal’s anger seemed to fade as he took in the scene in front of him.

"Will," he breathed, his voice tinged with awe. He came into the garage, stepping over the body as though it were nothing, and kneeling down in front of Will. He reached out and carefully pulled the blade from his hand. The bandage prevented some of the damage, but it was soaked in blood. It was hard to tell how much was Will's and how much was Gregory's.

"You're so beautiful like this," Hannibal told him quietly. He dropped the blade and reached out to gently place his hands on either side of Will's neck. "This is what I have always wanted for you."

"Did you plan this?" Will demanded softly, pulling his gaze from Gregory's still body to look Hannibal in the eyes.

"You are the one thing in my life I did not plan for," Hannibal promised him.

"But you wanted this," Will said.

"Yes," Hannibal agreed, before glancing back at the body. "We can still leave together, Will. I can get rid of the body, I can clean the scene. And we can leave this all behind."

Will's breath caught and he imagined saying yes, and just disappearing with Hannibal. Just forgetting about everything that lay behind them, and only worrying about what still lay ahead.

And then the sirens started up in the distance, and the fantasy dissolved.

Hannibal froze, glancing towards the garage door before turning his piercing eyes back on Will. "What have you done?" he whispered harshly, giving Will a rough shake.

Freddie, Will realized. He hadn't checked in, and she'd actually come through. He laughed breathlessly, unable to believe he'd forgotten. He wondered what she'd said. Jack would know he was hiding here, at the very least.

There was no way out for either of them, now.

Hannibal exhaled slowly, coming to the same realization. "You've turned yourself in, as well," he said sadly. "You do realize you will be just as much a prisoner as me?"

"Maybe it's where we both belong," Will told him. "Or are you going to kill me now?"

Hannibal was close enough that their lips almost touched as he spoke, and his breath caught strangely as Hannibal's fingers tightened their grip on his neck.

"I should," Hannibal told him. "But it seems this love of mine has a rather inconvenient side effect."

Will leaned forward, letting his forehead fall against Hannibal's. "You killed Matthew," he said. "I couldn't just let you get away."

"I thought you understood," Hannibal said. "But you understand nothing."

They could hear the crash of the front door and then boots stomping down the hallway. They stayed where they were even as Jack appeared at the doorway, his gun held out to aim right at Hannibal while FBI agents flooded in all around them.

“Step away from Will," Jack snarled, "and put your hands where I can see them."

Hannibal reached out to put his hands in the air, his forehead still pressed against Will's. "You know where to find me," he whispered.

Jack reached out and dragged Hannibal's hands behind his back, tugging him up and away to put a few feet between him and Will as he did. Beverly dropped down beside Will as Jack continued to pull Hannibal away, but he jerked away when she reached out. "Don't touch me," Will snarled.

"Will, we need to see where you've been hurt," she said, keeping her voice low and soothing. "Will?"

He blocked out her voice, all of their voices, and leaned forward until his forehead rested against the floor. He took in deep gasping breaths that did nothing to still his frantic heart, as he faced the realization that he was far more distressed by Hannibal's capture than he was by the fact that he just killed a man.

Maybe he'd ended up passing Hannibal's test, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Up Next: Hannibal is refusing to confess to anyone other than Will Graham. Jack wants to send him in to get a full accounting of the victims, but there’s only one question Will has in mind: what happened to Matthew Brown?

End Notes

Chapter titles are quotations:

1: "where the soul shines": Don Juan, Lord Byron
2: "also gazes into you": Beyond Good and Evil, Friedrich Nietzsche
3: "a great and sudden change": Frankenstein, Mary Shelley
4: "with a fearful trill": Caged Bird, Maya Angelou
5: "boundless and bare": Ozymandias, Percy Bysshe Shelley
6: "caverns measureless to man": Kubla Khan, Samuel Taylor Coleridge
7: "time to murder and create": The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, T.S. Eliot
8A: "through darkness for to wade": The Faerie Queene, Edmund Spenser
8B: "so mortal was their malice": The Faerie Queene, Edmund Spenser

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